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THE CARNIVAL OF FLORENCE

THE CARNIVAL OF FLORENCE

BY

MARJORIE BOWEN

"MONTRE CHE IO CANTO, O DIO REDENTORE,
VEDO L'ITALIA TUTTA A FIAMMA E FOCO,
PER QUESTA GALLI, CHE CON GRAN VALORE
VENGON, PER DISERTAR NON SO CHE LOCO."

Matteo Maria Boiardo.

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PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

Girolamo Savonarola is one of the most tragic figures in modern history, not because of his horrific downfall and miserable end (for many greater and many lesser men have suffered a like martyrdom), but because he came to know himself inadequate to his mission, even to doubt of the mission itself and the Holy Power behind his inspiration, and was misled and bewildered by his own spiritual impulses. He was, as it were, the dupe of his own inspiration, and he came to feel that God had mocked him, for few cries of agony could be more exceedingly bitter than that despairing cry of Savonarola:

"If I have been deceived, God has deceived me!"

He had come to the pass when he was able to conceive of a God capable of making a mock of his passionate, austere earnestness when such as the Borgia and the Medici (fiends in flesh they seemed to the Dominican) were allowed to triumph with the hideous hydra-headed evils and infamies of the basest of earthly powers.

A survey of the life of this remarkable man will soon show all manner of tragedy: he was ugly, sickly, unloved; thwarted in his early passion, sensitive, awkward, self-conscious, uncertain of himself, of an unhappy bilious temperament, melancholy and nervous: never did a poorer vessel contain the fire of genius.

Savonarola nearly accomplished a *great* thing—the reform of the Roman Church that would have prevented the Reformation. He was in the pure sense of the word a Protestant, but not a Heretic—a Reformer, but not a Dissenter: he would have purified from within, not have attacked from without. Though he declaimed with ferocious zeal against the Borgia Pope, he had no dream of overturning the Chair of St. Peter, nor of procuring a schism in the Church.

He affected his times in only a passing manner, for he was but one figure among many figures in the gorgeous pageant of the Renaissance, and his furious ardour left no trace behind on the gay, lovely, cruel, and voluptuous procession of Italian days.

Savonarola lived to be forsaken, reviled, dispised—to find himself shrinking from torture, from death—without courage, without faith, and knowing that he had accomplished nothing. His supreme tragedy lay not in the triumphant ferocity of his enemies, but in his own limitations which had rendered his efforts useless.

This sombre, awful, and lonely figure of Girolamo Savonarola!

Yet the drama, both grand and piteous, of this strange and full life, set against the background of the enchanting *City of the Lily*, then in all her pride, glory, and wealth, may well excuse this tale, wherein nothing is of the author save the imagination which connects up the mosaic of facts.

MARJORIE BOWEN.

SANDHURST, KENT,
June 1925.

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BOOK FIRST

THE CARNIVAL OF THE MEDICI

" Viva nei nostri cor, viva, o Fiorenza ! "

G. Benivieni.

THE CARNIVAL OF FLORENCE

CHAPTER I

APRILIS

ANDREA, kneeling in the Church of Santa Croce, looked at the straight figure and bent head of Aprilis kneeling before him and wondered why he loved her, and despised himself for loving her, and endeavoured to think of her and her faults so contemptuously that he should love her no more.

The great church was brightly and softly lit by the glow, half dull rose, half dull purple, of the June sun streaming through the high stained-glass window, in which gay colours predominated, and falling on the warm red floor, the tinted marbles of the wall and floor monuments, and the coloured gowns of the little group of worshippers who knelt among the brown benches, looking like dolls under that great lift of arch and painted roof and on that vast expanse of floor.

The altar shone in its own light of tall yellow candles, scarlet and gold ran in one stream of brilliancy through altar cloth and altar furniture ; behind the altar the lady chapel was dimmed by a shadow the colour of

clear amber, through which the vivid, precise lines of the gorgeous window blazed.

A priest, looking minute in the wide space and so adorned as to appear one with his images, was standing before an immense book, of which a monk in a brown habit turned over the pages; the blood-red rose in the centre of the priest's chasuble was the one thing about him noticeable; as he moved and bowed and bent, the rose seemed to float alone before the altar, into which the white and gold of his vestments was absorbed.

His voice, rising in the chaunts, stirred but did not fill the silence; the clink of the censers in the hands of the little acolytes was distinctly heard through the soft murmur of the Latin.

The church was very pleasant and full of a gentle atmosphere of peace and holiness, of a placid sense of a perfect understanding with the almighty powers of heaven and a complete ignoring of the troubles and agonies of the world.

All the kneeling figures looked composed and holy; the priest seemed as remote from humanity as if he ministered on the steps of heaven.

Andrea knew that this was but the effect of the silence of the worshippers; the lofty lines and great spaces of the church; the tempered, coloured light; the candles on the high altar and the noble sound of the classic phrases.

Aprilis, kneeling so motionless, so devout, looked like one of Messere Perugino's saints, but Andrea knew that she was a true child of Florence, and was filled with none but worldly thoughts; he knew that the air of holiness that encompassed her was but a trick of shape

and colour, the way the light fell on her downcast face, the effect of the slender line of her delicate figure.

All illusion, thought Andrea, but without bitterness. He did not yet know his own mind, whether he cared most for things spiritual or things earthly; he was alternately drawn by the glamour of pagan joy and beauty, and the stern appeal of the Christian creed; he loved Aprilis, and in her he believed there was no soul, therefore his reason tried to deny and mock this love.

In the conflict an indifference had fallen on him; he seemed to stand passive in the confusions of the world; to-day he looked at Aprilis with greater coldness than he had ever looked before.

He was able to tell himself that he had seen more beautiful girls in Florence, and to imagine that he himself had endowed her with the charms for which he held her precious.

The service was soon over; the priest and the monk passed into the sacristy, followed by the acolytes; the worshippers rose and came slowly down the long aisle, over the flat alabaster tombs of knights and churchmen.

Andrea still knelt in his place and waited for Aprilis to pass.

She came even more slowly than the others; behind her walked two other women, her father's sister and a cousin who was a paid dependent and guardian. Aprilis was Madonna Aprilis di Ser Rosario Fiorivanti (a name that seemed set with flowers, Andrea thought), and her family, though not noble, were wealthy, and she moved in luxurious ways, and was far above the aspirations of Andrea, though he was one of the Salvucci of San Gimignano and of better blood; but he was poor and had

to use his learning to obtain a living, while Ser Rosario di Fiorivanti was a great banker and money-lender, who was undoubtedly planning a sumptuous match for his daughter.

With lowered eyes she passed him, immaculate in her reserve and air of aloofness ; she seemed a precious thing set apart for some exquisite end, a creature not to be profaned by vulgar admiration ; the two stout women following her guarded her with jealous looks.

It was easy to see that the Fiorivanti set a great value on Aprilis.

She herself seemed well aware of this value, and yet to hold herself modestly, as one whom the world could not greatly affect.

Tall, yet not beyond a just womanly height, she had that voluptuous slenderness Ser Sandro di Botticelli had given to the pagan goddesses he had painted for Lorenzo dei Medici ; her close, dark-red gown, open at the sides below the waist over a dull-green under robe, and laced across with gold, set off her figure cunningly.

Her fair hair, bleached, gilded, and waved, went smoothly back into a wide meshed net of gold thread, on her smooth brow hung a single pearl by a little fine gilt thread—the *ferroniera*—the fashionable adornment of the moment.

Her close sleeves were slashed over green silk and tied with gold ribbons ; against the soft line of her bosom her clasped hands held a prayer-book.

" She is really what she seems ? " mused Andrea, confused by her air of remoteness and purity.

Then, as she passed him, she raised her eyes, recognizing him with a little glance and a little, trembling smile.

" She is as much a woman as the naked Venuses they turn up in the fields," thought Andrea ; " in her heart she is no choicer than the little flower-seller on the Lung' Arno—but the Fiorivanti knows how to set up her price."

He followed her to the door, despite the frowns of her companions, lifting the leathern cover for her passage.

She thanked him gravely, turning her head so that for an instant her face was close to his.

Her countenance was as smooth and fair as that of a child, her warm pallor, her faint pink lips, her gold-brown eyes and fine slanting brows had in the gold shade of the church the exquisite look of tinted alabaster.

Then she moved away with her slow, well-taught movements and went out on to the broad sunlight that dazzled on the steps.

Andrea came behind her, looking at her with more curiosity than love.

Aprilis spoke now ; her voice was low and quite expressionless.

" We shall see you at the Carnival to-morrow, Ser Andrea ? "

" The Carnival ? "

" Messere had forgotten that to-morrow was the first day of San Giovanni ? " Her tone was the same, but she gave him another of those innocent but wholly worldly glances that so affected his judgment of her enshrined holiness.

" Now I remember, Madonna."

The cousin pulled her sleeve and the aunt said it was getting late ; with the stiffest reverence to Andrea the three ladies descended the long white steps to where

their chariot waited, drawn into the little strip of shade that edged one side of the great piazza.

"So she was thinking of the Carnival," thought Andrea, "and probably of nothing else all the time she was at her prayers."

He came down the steps slowly, watching the departing chariot and heedless of the steady beat of the sun, which was beginning, day by day, to increase into full strength.

The vast square of the piazza, so often the scene of tourney and elaborate merrymaking, was now deserted; the blinds were down in the windows of the painted houses; under the shadow of their projecting upper stories a few passers-by stood and conversed.

The heat was over the city like a stillness; the old woman selling candles outside the church was asleep in the darkness of the porch, a beggar child was asleep on the steps; as the few people came from the church he sat up, yawning, to whine for money.

Andrea descended into the piazza; he felt suddenly tired of the town, and a longing for the sweet open airs of the hills; but he had to stay in Florence at the pleasure of his master, the great and learned Prince Conte della Mirandola, to whom he was secretary. He crossed the burningly hot extent of the piazza to the shadow of the houses.

There two men were standing before the open door that led into the darkness of a stone-worker's shop; one held a slim black vase of antique shape painted with red figures.

Andrea brightened with pleasure at the sight of him; Cristofano degli Albizzi was one of his master's acquaint-

ance, and, despite the difference in their position, one of his own.

"Ah, Andrea!" exclaimed the young noble, "look what was found yesterday at Pratolino—some peasant discovered a treasure-trove in his vineyard—come within and see the rest—Messere Giorgio bought them all!"

Andrea's eyes shone; he completely forgot Aprilis as he followed Cristofano into the dark shop of Messere Giorgio, the stone-cutter.

There, on a bench, used for cutting and setting the fine marble needed for mosaic work, were displayed the relics of the ancient world, turned up after so many hundred years from the soil that had sheltered them so securely. Behind them stood the stout master mason with clay-stained apron, surveying with a critical admiration the objects on which he had spent many good ducats, for the peasants were beginning to know the value of their finds in the eyes of the cultured Florentines.

Andrea saw two vases similar to that Cristofano held, one of thick glass coloured by the long burial with delicate shot tints of pink, blue, and gold. A huge statuette of a boy binding on his sandals, green as jade in parts from verdigris, and a marble head with wings bound to the hair, one broken close to the waving locks and fillet, the other still grandly pointing outwards.

Placed a little apart was a crown of acorns and oak leaves formed of beaten gold and a bracelet of the same workmanship representing laurel leaves and berries.

Messere Giorgio told Andrea that a farmer near Pratolino had been sinking a new well in his vineyard, when he had come upon these objects lying close together as if they had been buried there for purposes of safety.

The village priest had heard of the discovery and roused the peasants to raid the vineyard and seize the heathen devils, who would, he said, bring a curse on them all.

There had been a fight with pitchforks in the moonlight, and the priest had carried off in triumph a little alabaster figure of Hermes, which he had ground into powder and used for whitewashing the stems of his fruit trees against the ants.

" Poor Hermes ! " said Andrea ; " to lie so long in the earth only for such an end ! "

Messere Giorgio made a grimace.

" The priests are like that, they destroy all of what they find—and the peasants help them, out of fear, thinking these things are devils," he said.

" Perhaps they are," answered Andrea whimsically.

He could, for all his learning and worldly culture, understand something of the peasant's feelings of terror ; these beautiful fragments, representing an age so long dead that now it was scarcely to be comprehended, these broken symbols of the pagan beliefs that had so long been anathema, excited in him a feeling of attraction that was almost awe, almost fear.

He took up the mutilated head, the winged Victory, and looked into the perfect, serene features, discoloured with earth, and as he looked his awe increased ; it seemed to him that in meddling with these half-understood gods they were meddling with something more powerful than they guessed, something that was beyond their destruction or their worship, and though so ancient, most terribly alive.

" They say I may be denounced to the Inquisition for having these in my shop," smiled Messere Giorgio.

" Not in Florence," said Cristofano. " Here the old learning and the old art will ever be protected, my Giorgio."

" But Fra Girolamo grows great," answered the stone-cutter, " and is in among the people like a wind among the grasses, bending all to his direction."

Cristofano turned to Andrea, who was still gazing at the head with the broken wings.

" How is it that you were in Santa Croce to-day ? " he asked. " Fra Girolamo was preaching in the Duomo."

" I know—I have heard him," answered Andrea indifferently. " He is very fierce and terrible, but his eloquence affects me little more than Fra Mariano's empty elegancies."

" He had the people to-day," remarked the young noble thoughtfully. " His sermon was a delirium—the church full, all weeping, sobbing, falling on their faces, calling on Christ to pity Florence and save her from her sins. He is a man of great power, of growing power, Andrea."

" The Magnifico would give much to get him out of Florence," smiled the stone-cutter, " and His Holiness much to have him in Rome, safe in Castel San Angelo, eh, Messere ? "

" He spoke to-day of Pope Medici and Sforza with more hatred than men speak usually of the devil," said Cristofano.

" He throws himself against a force that will shatter him," remarked Andrea ; he turned to the stone-cutter. " The Conte della Mirandola will buy this head if you will put it aside for him," he said.

He spoke from the intense desire he had to keep the

Victory within his own sight; as he was too poor for such purchases he used the magnificence of his master to attain his ends.

"I will take these two gold wreaths," said Cristofano; "the Magnifico has some like them, but these are finer—also keep for me the glass bottle if the price be not too high."

Messere Giorgio put the articles aside.

"These are tear vases, are they not?" asked Andrea, looking at the pottery vessels.

Cristofano smiled.

"I think they are rather what the women used to put their paints and ointments in," he replied.

"The women!" exclaimed Andrea. "What were the women like then? Were they models for such faces as this?"

He pointed to the mysterious loveliness of the Victory.

"Ay," laughed Cristofano, "as much as Messere Lionardo's Madonnas are a true likeness of Cecilia Bergamini or Lucrezia Crivelli, was this the true likeness of some foolish woman."

The glance of the two young men met, and Andrea smiled too.

"You have heard of the betrothal of Madonna Aprilis di Ser Rosario Fiorivanti?" asked Cristofano suddenly.

Andrea still smiled; he had been expecting this news so long that he was forearmed against it; at the moment he thought of her almost with indifference.

"It is to the Conte della Gherardesca," continued Cristofano. "The betrothal is to be the first day of the *festa* of San Giovanni—to-morrow."

" I saw her in Santa Croce," said Andrea, " and spoke to her—she never told me of her betrothal."

" She will want to keep her admirers—it is a fine husband for her—a Gherardesca ! Her grandfather sold wash balls on the Ponte Vecchio."

" Well, the Medici themselves began no better," smiled the stone-cutter ; " only, it was herb pills, not wash balls, they hawked in Florence."

Andrea was turning away when Cristofano stayed him. " Wait ! Are you deep in work ? "

" I have no work," replied Andrea rather sadly, " beyond the little that Conte gives me. He does not write as he once did——"

" You are free to-day ? "

" The Conte is at Settignano and returns to-night—till then I am free."

" Walk with me to my villa, then ; it is pleasant beyond the walls."

" I should like it above all things."

With pleasant farewells to the stone-cutter the two young men left the shop, and turning down the Borgo Santa Croce, traversed the Lung' Arno, the Via della Zecca Vecchia and Via delle Grazie, crossed the Ponte della Trinità, and leaving the city by the great Porta Romana, climbed the steep hill of the Poggio Baroncelli.

When they reached the summit they turned through the pleasant orchards and fields towards the two churches of San Miniato and San Salvatore.

CHAPTER II

ABOVE FLORENCE

THE two young men passed the Villa Orsini on the summit of the Poggio Baroncelli and turned to the left towards the high-placed little church of Santa Margharita al Montici, which rose on the hills behind San Miniato. The road—winding, narrow, dusty—twisted between low walls enclosing fruit and kitchen gardens and slopes of olive and corn; below lay Florence, backed by the Apennines; above them, on the other side of the road, the hill continued to rise; there a few houses showed between the groves of chestnut, cypress, and oak.

In this pleasant part Cristofano degli Albizzi had a small villa; he was a cadet of a family that had at one time rivalled in pretensions and power the Medici themselves, and who now, though they had been hopelessly worsted in the struggle for supremacy, still maintained a secret and strong opposition to the family which reigned over Florence in the person of Piero, son of the great Lorenzo.

Andrea believed that it was for this reason that Cristofano supported Fra Girolamo, the Dominican friar who daily denounced the iniquities of Florence, for an enemy of the Medici must be a friend of the Albizzi.

But Cristofano was neither indiscreet nor truculent. Greatly interested in the revival of classic learning,

which had taken cultured Florence by storm, a former pupil of Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Academy, yet, orthodox in his support of Church and Pope, he seemed one destined to live quietly and avoid the dangerous places of life.

Walking slowly and conversing very little, the two friends reached the last rise of the hill, and paused at the foot of the steep last height, where the little church of Santa Margharita crowned the summit. They seated themselves on the low stone coping that here divided the road from the orchards, and looked down through the fruit trees at Florence, which lay golden in the sun that filled the valley of the Arno like wine poured into a cup.

A mulberry tree laden with white fruit shaded them ; there was no one else in sight, and they sat silent in the great stillness, gazing down at the lovely city lying remote beneath them.

The clear green of vines, now covered with clusters of vivid hard grapes, the broad leaves and soft fruit of fig trees, the silver colour of olives mingled with the erect dark forms of cypress, the red-gold patches of corn, among which grew cherry, peach, almond, apple, and pear trees, the luscious green patches of unripe grain, the pale gold hues of barley and of oats sloped in one richness of abundance down to the very walls of the city.

Here and there a cottage showed, set white and square on some brow of the hill, with a terrace wreathed in the last dark-red, climbing roses, or an oleander bush covered with pearl-pink blossoms before the door, or a pomegranate tree blazing scarlet flowers at the porch.

Nothing could well have been more beautiful than

this prospect, nothing more gorgeous than the towered city lying enclosed in the opulent hills.

Almost in the centre rose the pale red dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, beside it the tower of the Campanile, from this distance looking ivory white, beyond the smaller dome of San Lorenzo, and before all the soaring, darker tower of the Palazzo della Signoria, that proud emblem of the might and freedom of the Florentines—double battlemented, a menace and a challenge to the stranger. Nearer showed the graceful length of San Miniato, and in between the bulk of the great palaces and the stretches of red-roofed and white-fronted houses rose the famous towers and the watch-houses on the great walls, their metal pennons and weather-cocks stiff and glittering above the city.

To the right there was a glimpse of the yellow waters of the Arno as they flowed down into the town; beyond was the gracious outline of the Apennines, the villas round San Domenico and Fiesole, and the lift of Monte Senario above Pratolino. To each young man the prospect was indeed familiar, yet both looked at the panorama stretched before them with an interest and admiration as of strangers as well as with the love of friends.

Yet to Andrea, who was not a Florentine, the magnificence of the distant city was as deceitful as had seemed the holy atmosphere of Santa Croce.

"How grand and serene and noble she looks!" he exclaimed. "And how full of lies and pettiness and wrong and misery she is!"

Cristofano smiled.

"That is but to say man's work outshines himself," he replied. "He can build these churches, these towers,

these walls, so full of majesty and power, but for himself he remains for ever creeping on the earth."

Andrea did not answer.

"Fra Girolamo says these things are snares," continued Cristofano, "that all beauty, all magnificence, all science, all learning, but block the way to God."

"He would make us all bare-footed friars," said Andrea, "passing our days in mortification and prayer—is he right? Or were the ancients right? Cristofano, lately there has been a singular division in my soul—shall one gain heaven by renouncing the world, or shall we enjoy heaven on earth as the pagans did, worshipping all beauty and splendour, exalting the body? Is Fra Girolamo right in his prophecies of death and disaster and terror on those who enjoy what the earth offers them?"

Cristofano pointed to the sumptuous landscape.

"Whatever does nature—the earth herself—give?" he answered. "Does she teach mortification, self-denial, self-torture, self-abnegation?"

"But the thought of these things are in the souls of men," said Andrea, "otherwise we should be as the beasts."

"They were not in the souls of the ancients, my Andrea. What could the man who sculptured that winged Victory you purchased to-day have thought of our emaciated, bleeding, creeping saints and martyrs? He would have turned away in horror—ay, even from the mangled Christ, for to him ugliness was sin."

Andrea slightly shuddered.

"Yet you follow Fra Girolamo!" he exclaimed, almost in reproof.

"I follow no one," replied the young patrician calmly, "yet do not imagine that I escape the shadow of the cross—I cannot. Awful, sinister, it looms over the whole world, and from it comes a terrible voice, crying, 'Thou shalt not!' to all our sweet desires. I, no more than another, can escape. I bow, I bend, I try to expiate. When Fra Girolamo speaks of the wrath to come I shake to my soul—*I believe.* Yet, when I am free—as now—in the open air—I wish I had been born a pagan. I wish I had lived and died ignorant of this sacrifice under which the whole world groans—I wish that I had been one of those men who never knew that Christ bled to save them."

He spoke these last words with a sudden emotion that was almost passion, and leant back wearily against the thick bent stem of the mulberry tree.

Andrea looked at him eagerly; his own feelings were so much the same—the unconquerable instinct towards those things Christianity called anathema—the recoil from those things Christianity upheld, yet therewith the inability to break away from the faith that dominated the world, the shuddering belief in hell, the cowering from the eye of God—all this was known to Andrea, perhaps to most men in this end of the fifteenth century after Christ.

"Yet," said he, continuing his thoughts aloud, "how many are not troubled at all—how many do their pleasure, say their prayers, and sleep well of nights!"

"They believe that repentance will save them," smiled Cristofano. "For me it is impossible to credit that I may do as I like and hoodwink God with a prayer

or a handful of money—nay, one or the other, all or nothing."

"Then you must join San Marco or become as godless as the Magnifico!" cried Andrea.

Cristofano looked grave.

"*If* I could be sure, I should become a novice certainly," he answered. "*If* I could disbelieve it all I would live my life to the full, even as does Piero dei Medici. As it is——"

He broke off and pulled a spray of the white, feathery-flowered clematis from the tangled branches that grew over the wall.

"As it is, we drift," said Andrea; "for me I envy men like the Medici, like Ludovico Sforza, like the Pope—men who dare to the utmost and still can believe themselves safe with heaven."

"The Magnifico and the Duke of Milan," replied Cristofano, "serve a superstition only—they are not men of probing wits or eager souls—and the Pope——"

"He has wit enough," smiled Andrea.

"He is a Borgia," said Cristofano, "and if there is a devil the Borgia must be of his breed and under his protection—they fear nothing, believe nothing—perhaps they are to be envied."

Andrea sat silently looking at the city and the landscape, that serene and careless beauty which seemed to mock at their discussion, at the futile terms with which they feebly strove to unravel the confusions of the world.

The two young men themselves were fitting figures for the scene; Cristofano was beyond the common—handsome, slight, graceful—and of a type rare but much admired in Tuscany.

His complexion was golden pale, his eyes a clear brown, his hair the colour of a deerskin and falling in thick curls on to his shoulders; his well-shaped but slightly thick lips and nostrils balanced the spiritual look of his open brow and candid eyes; the chin was firm and a little heavy, giving an impression of a character haughty and materialistic; the whole face, oval shaped and close shaved after the Florentine fashion, was both beautiful and pleasing, the dreariness of the expression being atoned by the masculine firmness of the lines.

He was in his twenty-eighth year and serious in his deportment; his attire was a loose, white-belted coat to the knees, open at the throat on a close-drawn, cambric shirt, red hose and leather shoes, and a flat cap with a single heron's feather.

Andrea was within a few months of the same age, but slightly taller, of a stouter build, a more impetuous manner and eager carriage, with a dark face, irregular and animated features, and curling black hair.

He was dressed as simply as Cristofano in green doublet and white hose; he too was close shaved and wore his hair into his neck.

A gentle breeze blew through the fruit trees and bent the heads of the corn; but the veils of heat over Florence remained undisturbed, the air above the town quivered with sparks of gold.

The languor of the soft heat was like a drug in the blood, the silence of the fields and orchards seemed the silence of enchantment, purple and blue butterflies darted in among the olive trees, the fine green blossoms of which fell in a shower beneath them; beetles of a lustrous metallic-green colour whirred overhead, a few

faint milk-white clouds floated above the distant Apennines.

"Did you not love Madonna Aprilis?" asked Cristofano, half closing his eyes dreamily.

"I do not know," said Andrea. "I thought I loved her—I have thought of little else for a year, but I have tried to combat this love—even before I knew of her betrothal to-day."

"Why should you love her?" asked Cristofano lazily. "She is like a thousand other girls in Florence, she is not noble nor learned, she has been trained to think of nothing but her beauty."

"For her beauty I cared," said the lover. "She is very exquisite—I wanted her, young and immaculate as she is; I wished to possess her, as one wishes to possess a white rosebud, and crush it open to the heart."

"There are many white rosebuds in Florence," returned his friend. "Why must you set your mind on Madonna Aprilis?"

"That is what I have asked myself—that is what I have argued with myself—yet still my unreasonable thoughts turn to her."

"Unreasonable, indeed!—what has she? Nothing but that fairness she spends her days in preserving. For the rest she is a blank—a tablet of virgin wax. I know these ladies."

"You speak bitterly."

"Not bitterly—but I marvel at love—love such as yours. A fair woman is like a fair flower, to be admired and passed by, or to be plucked and cast aside. And there are so many of them."

"Now you speak like a pagan," smiled Andrea.

" Yet I admit your reason—it is foolish to fix caprici fancy on a woman who is unknown to one save for fairness——"

" You perchance are mystical and full of dreams you follow the fashion for platonic love," return Cristofano lightly. " Well, when Madonna Aprilis wed you may become spiritual lovers—as poor Guilia dei Medici and Simonetta—why not? And a seco time make Florence stare at the marvels of plato love."

" You mock at me," said Andrea, " but your wo do not touch me greatly, for I have almost ceased think of Madonna Aprilis."

This was not true, for the memory of the face th had been so close to his in the doorway of Santa Cr was coming again vividly before him; to prevent t subject from being further discussed he asked, wi indifferent gaiety:

" Is there no woman in your heart, Cristofano? "

The young noble twisted the clematis between fingers.

" None," he answered. " Nor will there be until can find one who is Madonna and Venus in one—so and body perfect—such I might worship if I could nev attain, but the beauties tripping along the Lung' Ar do not stir me. And I am thinking of other things, n Andrea."

His friend did not know when to take Cristofa seriously; he could never be quite sure how much the Albizzi's lightness and indifference was assume how much real purpose was concealed beneath th manner.

"What things now?" he asked.

Cristofano put his hand out from the shade of the mulberry tree and laid it on the parapet, where the sun now burnt with sufficient force to scorch the flesh.

"It is too hot here," he remarked. "Come to my villa; it is pleasant in the grounds."

He rose, the drifted olive blossoms like a green dust in the folds of his white coat and in his hair.

"You put me off," said Andrea.

"Nay—I will be frank—what is occupying me is a plot—plots."

Andrea was unpleasantly surprised.

"Plots?"

"Are you startled?" Cristofano laughed. "Every Florentine is plotting."

"This is Fra Girolamo's doing," cried Andrea as he rose.

"No; the friar does not intrigue."

Andrea put his hand on the other's sleeve and lowered his voice.

"Plots against the Medici?" he asked.

Cristofano turned his charming face calmly towards his friend.

"Yes, you might call it that," he said; "a plot at least to cast Piero dei Medici and his family from Florence."

"Leave that to time; he has not so firm a seat," replied Andrea, "but that he will eventually fall. Why meddle?"

"It is too long a story for now," returned Cristofano; "the intrigue amuses me at least——"

"But is dangerous?"

"Hardly. The Signoria do not love the Medici."

Half wearily, half moved, Andrea protested.

"Leave it to Fra Girolamo's tongue to drive Piero out of Florence!"

"I tell you this amuses me—is it not as good an occupation as collecting vases and antique statues, and reading ancient philosophy?" replied Cristofano half jestingly.

They turned back the way they had come, the olives and the corn showing above the low wall above them, below the view of Florence now and then obscured by rising ground; the dust of the road was full of the minute blossoms of the olive, the rich heads of the corn stalks against the deep blue sky were mingled here and there with the dark boughs of ilex and laurel.

The steady bell of Santa Margharita beat on the windless air with an insistent note.

"The world is so beautiful," sighed Andrea. "And you think of plots!"

"And you of Madonna Aprilis!"

"And both of us of God and Devil—and Fra Girolamo and Venus!"

Smiling, they paused by the open iron gates in the wall which led to the Villa degli Albizzi; the vista towards the house was of the same opulent plenty—corn, fig trees, vines, roses, lilies, poppies, bordering the avenue.

Either side the gate grew a tall cypress, beneath it a myrtle bush starred with wax-like flowers.

Here the walls were higher and hid Florence and the hills; the young men were enclosed in the narrow road, with the trees shading them, and before them the open gate, with the view of the avenue and sloping gardens.

"Can one not forget everything here?" asked Andrea.

"Nay," said Cristofano; "do you not hear the Christian bell?"

They turned in at the gates and passed between the flowers and the corn, the fruit trees and the vines; the sun was now directly overhead, and the long rays fell with the power of a sword on the earth; the loud whirring noise of the grasshoppers was heard incessantly.

As the terrace and white front of the house came in sight Cristofano took his friend's arm.

"Listen," he said; "to-morrow I go to see the Magnifico at Cafaggiuolo."

"You—to see Piero dei Medici!" whispered Andrea.

Cristofano's full sweet lips curved into a smile half mischievous.

"It is a secret—a secret diplomatic mission—you see how deep I am in conspiracy."

CHAPTER III

THE SARDONYX VENUS

ANDREA SALVUCCI left the Villa degli Albizzi as the sun was nearing the hills and walked slowly through the ineffably sweet evening airs to the house of the Conte della Mirandola in the Via Larga.

He was troubled with many things, stung, despite his resolution, with the infinite loss of Aprilis, vexed at Cristofano's light assertions of his complicity in a plot against the Medici, and, as always, distracted and disheartened by the complexities of this life of Florence in which he found himself involved.

When he first left his ruined estates in the little hill republic of San Gimignano he had found Florence beautiful beyond words, and had felt no other desire than to spend his life among these people, so refined, cultured, and learned, so devoted to the finest loveliness of art and literature.

But now he almost disliked them ; their indifferency, their sophistry, their inaction, their enthusiasm for the artificial, the cynicism of their over-culture, and the hidden cruelties and wrongs beneath their urbane manners began to weary him, for he was naturally earnest and sincere.

Even Cristofano, whom he loved and admired, Cristofano, with his passionate love for the classics, his purchase of antique statues and vases, his learned dissertations on Plato and Aristotle—and his friendship with Fra Girolamo and submission to the sternest Christian doctrines—he was an enigma, he clothed his contradictions with that half-mockery which baffled Andrea in so many Florentines.

It was true that Andrea himself had fallen under the fascination of the great revival of ancient learning and the great discovery of ancient beauty, and he did not know either whether this was of the devils or of God, but he fought his difficulties with anguish of spirit, and strove sincerely to come to a conclusion that would bring peace to his soul—but Cristofano smiled and shrugged and seemed indifferent alike to Christ or Pan, the Virgin or Venus, though he declared himself willing to devote himself to one or the other—*when in one or the other he should wholly believe.*

There seemed to Andrea a sophistry in this not in accordance with earnest endeavour after the truth; he thought Cristofano played with mighty things, and that repulsed him from his friend.

The young Albizzi had told him that the Magnifico had heard he was one of the *Piagnoni*—as the followers of Fra Girolamo were called—and had sent for him, obviously with the object of discovering the aims and scope of the friar's party, and that he had refused to go, and that Piero had entreated him, and that finally the interview had been arranged to take place at the Medici villa at Cafaggiuolo, in the evening of the first day of the Carnival of San Giovanni.

Andrea had asked why so far outside the city as Cafaggiuolo, and why the carnival eve ?

Cristofano had laughed and said that the Medici liked secrecy and mystery, and that indeed it was as well, for if the interview were blabbed over Florence it would do no good to any.

Andrea sensed circles within circles of subtle policies that were beyond his grasp ; he had, like his master, always kept away from the intrigues of Florence. He was surprised that Cristofano was already so well known a follower of Fra Girolamo as to be accepted by the Medici as a *Piagnoni*, and this seemed to him very inconsistent with much of what Cristofano said ; he began to think Cristofano ambitious.

Nor could he well associate the charming figure of the young man standing in the stone-cutter's shop with the black and red vase in his hand and the gaunt and terrible form of the friar.

Andrea could not understand.

" If I *believed* as Fra Girolamo believes I would follow him, barefoot and in sackcloth," he thought.

As he turned through the Porta Romana and came from the open country into the busy streets the pleasantness of the city struck him again irresistibly, almost against his will.

To-morrow was the feast of San Giovanni Baptista, the patron saint of the city ; it was the most important holiday of the year, and since their rule, the Medici had, with their usual encouragement of all that was gay and splendid, turned this festival into a second Carnival, lasting eight days. Already the various guilds, the dyers, the wool combers, the masons, the leather dressers,

the barber surgeons, the silk weavers, and all the major and minor crafts were decorating their quarters with silk hangings and pennons and images of their patron saints, so that the dark streets, with the tall, overhanging houses, were bright with gleams of colour.

The flag of the Republic was waving above the tower of the Palazzo della Signoria, and in the Loggia dei Priori opposite rich squares of tapestry had been displayed against the walls.

Marzocco, the stone emblematic lion of Florence in the Piazza della Signoria, was being wreathed with laurel and palms.

Andrea turned down the Via dei Calzaioli, which the guild of the shoemakers had gorgeously decorated, and pushed his way through the press of people to the Piazza del Duomo, where Santa Maria del Fiore and the Campanile rose heavenwards, two of the wonders of the world, majestic, huge in size, and glowing in the sunset light with the rose and ochre, pearl and dull blue, of the inlaid marbles of their walls ; high into the fading brightness of the sky Brunelleschi's dome, result of one man's genius and patience, symbol of endeavour and attainment, raised the white lantern into the last sunlight.

A few paces brought Andrea past the heavy pile of the massive Medici palace to the small house where the Conte della Mirandola lived when in Florence. He found his master just returned from Settignano and sitting alone in his twilit study.

This looked on a stone courtyard, where the sun had long ceased to fall, and where a fountain splashed between palms in terra-cotta vases.

The Conte was at the window, resting his chin in his hand, and his elbow on the narrow ledge; in the half dark his graceful figure in the long dark robe, with the full curls flowing on to his shoulders, looked like that of a woman.

"Messere Conte, am I late?" asked Andrea. "I thought that you would return after dark."

Della Mirandola turned like one roused from deep thought, and said no, and asked for a light. Andrea lit and trimmed a little lamp of antique shape which stood on a bracket in one corner. The clear soft light showed the small elegant room, the walls painted in red, black, and white, the floor tiled in the same colours, the black furniture, the desk holding a bust of Plato and a vase of lilies, the bookcases filled with costly volumes and a most beautiful painting of a lady's head in profile. It showed, too, this warm lamplight, the face of the Conte as he sat against the darkness of the window, his head still resting in his hand, a whimsical, fair, and most pleasant face, the full eyes, the sensitive nostrils, the arched mouth, all tilted slightly upwards at the corners, the complexion smooth and unlined, the hair thick and fair, falling round the firm oval of his face; he was clearly not of Florence.

Giovanni Pico, Conte della Mirandola, not yet thirty years of age, was already celebrated for his learning, his art, his beauty, his love of science, and eloquence, throughout Italy and France.

No man, save only Lorenzo dei Medici, had been so celebrated as the young prince, scholar, and philosopher who had been the first to introduce the study of Oriental tongues into Europe, who was credited with the know-

ledge of twenty-three languages, and whose famous tournament of learning held at Rome, consisting of nine hundred propositions propounded by himself, which he defied the scholarly world to answer, had brought him into disgrace with the Pope for the daring of his theological questions. Mirandola had submitted to Innocent and written an apology, and soon after settled at Florence, where he became the close friend of Lorenzo, Ficino and Poliziano—in brief, the most brilliant figure in the most brilliant city in the world.

Andrea's common sense had soon shown him that the Conte's reputation outstripped his merits—he was not the paragon he was commonly supposed to be, and still a long way from his boasted goal of universal knowledge.

But he was eager, ardent in the pursuit of wisdom, he was in the forefront of the intellectual movement of his time, and in himself he was gentle, brilliant, gay, and very lovable.

Since the death of Lorenzo he had lived a more retired life; his fame suffered some eclipse as men's attention was turned to the new Medici and his friends.

Mirandola threw himself with fresh ardour into his studies; he was at present engaged in studying the grammar of the Hebrew language and in planning a Latin work, the theme and object of which was to reconcile Paganism and Christianity.

For the Conte was, despite the width of his knowledge and the depth of his studies, still an orthodox Catholic.

And this fact sometimes comforted Andrea and sometimes filled him with despair.

To-night Mirandola looked pale and tired; the secretary, who was sincerely fond of him, decided that

he had been in ill health of late and too closely confined with his books.

" Messere is tired after the journey ? " he said.

Giovanni Pico shook his head and smiled gently.

" I found a Greek in Settignano ; he sold me this," he answered, and, as if there needed no other reason or excuse for his journey or his fatigue, he took from the gold-laced purse at his side a flat stone and held it up before the lamp flame.

It was a sardonyx, and contained all the colours of liquid gold, melting amber, soft honey, and the clear brown of tarn water.

In the centre, where the hues darkened to a burning flush, was cut in intaglio a Venus kneeling in an open shell.

The fine curls of her flying hair mingled with the delicate ripples of the sea, her soft body was half concealed, half revealed, by the fluted circle of the double shells, one exquisite foot rested on the surf.

The gem was so beautiful that the two young men looked at it in silence.

It was more than a mere jewel, an ornament—it seemed a window into another world, to reveal the distances of a magic sea—the loveliness of a land long lost to men.

Nay, not lost, Andrea thought, but only vanished for a while, and in gazing at the frail lines of the minute Venus, through which the lamp smote a light that quivered like life itself, he felt a return of that awe that always touched him before this resurrected beauty ; as if some evil charm and power lay in these strange, alien, and silent things.

The Conte put the stone back in his pocket, and fixing his large clear eyes on the lamplight, asked quietly: "Did you go to hear Fra Girolamo preach to-day?"

Andrea was surprised at the question, which gave his thoughts a violent turn.

"No," he said. "To-day I went to Santa Croce. I do not love preaching."

Then he thought of Cristofano degli Albizzi; he wondered if he should ask his master to use his influence with the Magnifico on Cristofano's behalf—to say that the Albizzi was only playing at conspiracy and was not to be seriously treated.

Then he considered that any such interference would be foolishness; and how could he be sure Cristofano was not serious. While he stood silent, the Conte spoke again.

"Fra Girolamo spoke again of the coming of Vengeance into Italy—he prophesied that the Conqueror would enter Florence within the year. Angelo Poliziano was there—he told me."

The note of intense interest, almost yearning, in the Conte's voice further surprised Andrea; he knew that Mirandola had met the friar at Reggio some years before, and that he had ever since been interested in the strange Dominican, but he had never imagined this interest to be a personal one.

"I would rather have been in the Duomo to-day than at Settignano," added Mirandola.

"Even at the cost of losing the Venus on the sand?" asked Andrea sharply.

The Conte looked at him strangely.

"Fra Girolamo thinks such things sinful," he said—"thinks them a danger to the soul, full of evil."

"You too!" cried Andrea. "You too, Messere! Has all your learning given you no buckler against such thoughts?"

The young prince was silent; his long white hands turned over the costly parchment volumes of Greek and Hebrew which lay on the burdened desk.

"Forgive me," said Andrea, thinking he was offended —"forgive, Ser Conte, but I am troubled in my own mind about these things."

Mirandola turned to him with an instant smile of sweetness.

"I was not vexed, but thoughtful. Lately the world has greatly changed to me. Learning, science, and wisdom no longer allure me as they did. I see that I was very vain and arrogant in my boasted knowledge. And the preaching of this friar moves me strangely, and, Andrea, when I discourse with him I am inspired to join his brethren."

This confession shook and saddened Andrea; if Pico della Mirandola turned from the pride and beauty of the world, the golden fruits of knowledge, the ancient lores, the splendours and powers of wisdom, to the gaunt outline of the Cross, who was to resist that stern appeal, that grim command, 'Sell all thou hast and follow Me'?—these words seemed to ring in Andrea's ears as he listened to the Conte.

"This friar is terrible," he said.

"He is already a great power in Florence," returned the Conte; "the Medici hate and fear him."

Andrea thought of the Magnifico sending to Cristofano as to the emissary of an enemy to be considered.

"What will Fra Girolamo make of Florence?" he asked sadly.

"He aims to reform Italy," said Della Mirandola, "to cast out sin and suffering and corruption from the land, to put down the Pope and all tyrants—is not that a nobler ambition than the writing of books?"

And the young man looked at his volumes and manuscripts almost contemptuously.

"But you, Messere, were a friend of the Medici."

"Of Lorenzo, yes—never of Piero or his cousins," answered Mirandola, "never of his brother either, though the Cardinal is brilliant."

He seated himself at his desk and began cutting a quill; he looked so fatigued that Andrea was sure he was ill.

The secretary said nothing, however, but brought down the lexicons ready for the usual evening's task. Suddenly Pico della Mirandola rose again.

"Have you ever spoken to Fra Girolamo?" he asked.

"No," answered Andrea. "I have heard him preach —twice."

"Come with me now—come to San Marco and speak to him," said the Conte, with a certain eagerness.

Andrea slightly shuddered, for he felt himself being drawn nearer to an influence he had always endeavoured to avoid.

"Come," repeated Mirandola.

The secretary, without a word, took up his cap and followed into the street.

The moon was already high and the sky showed purple, flooded with liquid silver above the dark roofs

of the high palaces of the Via Larga ; the square pile of the Medici palazzo gleamed with light ; three young students, arm in arm, were singing one of Lorenzo's carnival songs: the quick gay tune rang in the street like a sharp peal of bells.

Turning in the opposite direction to the Medici palace, Mirandola and his companion walked up the Via Larga, a few yards brought them to the little piazza of San Marco, where stood the church and convent of the Dominicans, founded by Cosimo, the father of Lorenzo, and first of the Medici to rule over Florence.

Before they reached this piazza Andrea turned to look at a new and handsome palace on the other side of the street.

It was one recently built by Ser Rosario dei Fiorivanti —the home, shrine, and citadel that contained Aprilis.

She was there now in the loggia that looked on to the street ; behind her was the thin figure of her father and the stout figures of her female guardians. The light of one of the lamps hanging in the arches of the loggia fell on her face, the long fine rings of gold hair, and her bust and shoulders, across which her blue drapery was slightly ruffled by the low evening breeze.

It seemed impossible that she should detect him in the darkness, yet Andrea thought she looked at him with her clear brown eyes and smiled tremblingly as she had smiled that morning in the church of Santa Croce.

And to the young man's excited fancy her impassive loveliness partook of the look of the winged Victory and the Venus on the sardonyx as much as of the look of the Madonna, to whom her gentle expression of purity seemed to liken her.

Her face was quickly lost in the cross shadows of the street, but it remained in Andrea's memory, even when the lay brother had admitted them through the door of the convent into the cloister, that of San Antonio, or the dead, where the pavement was close set with tombs and the walls showed memorial paintings.

In the grass square of the cloister, roses and laurel grew, and there the still moonlight shone on the last of the pallid blooms and the dark motionless foliage of the straight, sharp-leaved bushes.

In the square of sky above was the moon herself, looking cold and remote, almost at the full and dazzling. The joyous noises of the street came muffled to this solitude. Andrea, feeling himself surrounded by the dead and isolated in the monastery, shivered as if a chill wind had touched his flesh.

Pico della Mirandola asked for the Prior, Fra Girolamo. The lay brother turned instantly across the moonlit cloister, begging the visitors to follow him; Andrea perceived that the Conte was better known at San Marco than he had supposed.

They passed into the second cloister of San Domenico, where the night air was heavy with the sweets of unseen flowers, then entered the convent building by a door to the right which led immediately to a steep flight of stairs.

These were lit only by the pale tongue of flame of a wall lamp, and were obscured by long dismal shadows; the air was hot and close and the silence seemed not the silence of solitude, but the silence of a great many people listening.

Andrea felt as if he were ascending into a prison.

CHAPTER IV

FRA GIROLAMO

A DOOR at the top of the stairs admitted them to a long corridor, from which the narrow entrances to the cells opened either side ; this was the top floor, and the cross-barred wooden roof rose high above the lower roofs of the cells, giving a curious effect of space and openness ; the Dominican passed this corridor and entered another similar, which ran along that front of the building which faced the piazza.

All was simple and faintly lit, but not gloomy ; the red floor and the open roof even gave an air of cheerfulness.

Yet Andrea still felt imprisoned ; he thought how strange in these surroundings looked the worldly figure of the Conte, with the gold embroidery on his sleeves and his shining, well-dressed hair.

The lay brother went a little ahead and entered the door at the extreme end of the corridor ; after a second he returned and said the Prior would see the Conte and his friend.

Andrea followed Mirandola through the narrow door which admitted into the cell of Fra Girolamo.

This was but slightly larger than that of the nethern

square, paved in red, lit by a small window looking on the piazza to the left, and on the right opening on an inner cell of similar proportions ; three beautiful paintings by Fra Angelico da Fiesole were the sole adornments, there were two chairs, and a long table, which held a small iron lamp.

The inner door was ajar, and a deep voice came from behind it, bidding them enter.

Andrea was angry with himself for shrinking back—why should he hesitate to enter though into the presence of Girolamo Savonarola, the Ferrarese monk who had chosen as his mission the regeneration of Florence ?

There was nothing wonderful in the history of this man, unless it was the way he had defied the Medici, the builders and patrons of this very convent, and the manner in which his stern doctrines had gained him a reputation in the most corrupt of cities.

" Why should I be afraid of him ? " asked Andrea, " he is neither God nor Devil."

And he stepped forward to encounter the Prior of San Marco. The monk had risen from a desk to meet them ; the cell was even smaller than the outer one, and Fra Girolamo seemed to fill it from floor to ceiling. His immense height struck Andrea with terror ; he had never seemed so tall in the pulpit, under the vast space of the Duomo.

Afterwards Andrea thought that this effect of supernatural size was a delusion, due to the scanty light of the lamp on the desk and the heavy folds of the monk's robe.

Be that as it may, for the moment the Prior seemed to tower.

Mirandola stooped to kiss his hand, and Andrea observed him with an eager, almost bitter curiosity.

Savonarola's appearance was remarkable, and, despite his profession, his fame, and his known life, neither holy nor saintly.

The features were heavy, gaunt, and powerful; the nose large, arched, and overhanging; the nostrils and lips thick as those of a sensualist; the skin coarse, sallow, and of a bilious look; the eyes small, unnaturally glowing, and deep-set under ragged black brows.

It was a countenance that bore traces of great, but hardly resigned, suffering—the pain of desperate self-torture of mind and body—the agony of a fury of self-sacrifice.

The expression that animated this face with terrible, almost unearthly power, was principally pride—the passionate, boundless pride of one who considers himself the chosen instrument of heaven, and combined with this was a look of hate—hate and contempt for the things that opposed him, wrath for the sins of the world.

Andrea could see neither peace nor sweetness nor meekness in this terrible face of the prophet and preacher of Christ; rather was it the face of one engaged in bitter conflict and swayed by frantic passions, than that of one who had attained to any calm. As Andrea in his turn kissed the long, full-veined hand, he felt the flesh hot to his lips, and his sense of the terror and power of this man increased, until he felt the beating of his own heart.

"I have disturbed you, Fra Girolamo," said Mirandola in a low voice, and he glanced remorsefully at the pages before the Prior, which, covered with a minute writing, still glistened with wet ink.

"The moment is past," returned Savonarola in an exhausted tone. "When I returned from the Duomo, I had a vision of the wrath to come. I heard warning voices from the sky, I saw the tyrants of the earth shaken as with a great wind, and blood running in the streets of Florence, and above Rome a black shadow like the trail of the skirts of doom."

"It is ever so," said Pico della Mirandola mournfully. "Father, your visions are ever of dread and horror."

"What else, think you, will come on the earth unless righteous living be established?" asked Savonarola fiercely.

His powerful gaze dwelt on the pleasant beauty of the young man and his expression softened; he seated himself.

"What do you want with me?" he questioned. "Come, what do you want with me, and who is this other?"

Andrea noticed that his air and tone were of great authority; he seemed one born to rule, to dominate; one who would rule the world, if he could.

"This is Messere Andrea Salvucci," replied the Conte, "who is troubled with many things—as I am. And we come to you, father, for comfort."

"Comfort!" repeated the Prior. He leaned forward in his chair, till his cowl was over his face, throwing heavy shadows on the rough lines.

There was nothing in the cell beyond the desk with the books, the chair, two stools, and a painting of the Crucified Christ on canvas fastened to a pole, the standard which Savonarola used to carry with him through the streets in procession.

Andrea felt oppressed by the bare, close, ill-lit cell.

and by the tremendous personality of the monk. Looking closely at him, Savonarola said :

" What are your troubles, my son ? "

The young man hung his head like a child ; an agitation of formless thoughts seized him.

" The world no longer pleases him," said Pico della Mirandola, " he is distressed because he knows not which way to go."

Andrea wondered how the Conte had divined this.

" Is it not so ? " continued the low, cultured voice of the young prince. " Learning and wisdom, work and pleasure, no longer satisfy—we, too, hear the warning voices and hear the clash of swords and the wail of the dying—we, too, would fly from the wrath to come."

The Prior's face brightened.

" Is this true ? " he asked, and he looked at Andrea.

The young man felt a sudden, swelling excitement; supposing he did try and tell something of his trouble—supposing he did put to the test the help Fra Girolamo could be to such as he ?

Supposing he made confession of everything save Aprilis, would the monk understand or aid ?

" Is it true," asked Fra Girolamo, " that you are tired of the profligacy of Florence ? "

Andrea raised his smooth face, now slightly flushed.

" It is true, father, that I am much confused in my mind by what I see about me. When I was very young I wished to become a monk. Now, again, that desire comes over me, yet I love the world."

" That may be combated by prayer and fasting," said Savonarola, " until the Divine Grace has strengthened you to overcome lusts and longings, Messere."

"Nay, father," answered Andrea. "Those things do not disturb me. The coarse lusts of the world do not allure me. I have always been of a serious, contemplative mind, given to solitude and meditation."

"What, then, is your temptation?" asked the monk.

Andrea drew a deep breath.

"How can I explain? The joy of beauty, the power of knowledge, the grace of culture, the spell of the ancient philosophers, the magic of ancient loneliness, the wonders of science—these things are my temptations, father."

Savonarola appeared utterly astonished.

"These things weigh with you against the fear of God?" he cried.

"Are they wrong?" asked Andrea.

"They are abominations of the devil," returned the Prior angrily.

The young man answered in a passionate despair. "Father, I have loved these pursuits all my life—can I help loving them that are so mighty and beautiful?"

"How can there be might and beauty where there is not Christ?" demanded Savonarola fiercely.

Andrea was silent, and Pico della Mirandola said softly:

"Father, do you not understand beauty?"

"I understand the beauty of God," said the monk, with great sternness.

"But not the beauty of other things?"

"Where there is not God I see no beauty."

The Conte sighed.

"This is a hard doctrine. Father, what of science and learning, is there no goodness in these?"

"All the learning we need is to study the way of

purity and righteousness. And science is invented of the devil to snare and distract men from God." The finality of this unhesitating judgment fell like a blow on Andrea's indecisions; he writhed under it, as a man knocked down will writhe to get to his feet again.

"There is so much in the world, Fra Girolamo," he cried, and his voice was rough with protest. "Can you dismiss it all so lightly? There is the Duke of Milan's mathematician who has invented birds that fly, and says he will make men fly also—he makes wonderful machines too; and though he has never eaten flesh or loved a woman, he paints pictures of such a loveliness that they make the senses swoon."

"This is Messere Leonardo da Vinci," said Savonarola, "the servant of a tyrant and a usurper; he is no better than a wizard, and all his tricks are done by black magic. The day will come when he and his works will be tumbled together into the pit of everlasting perdition."

"And the Genoese, Messere Colombo, who says he can discover the Fortunate Isles or perhaps Paradise, who says there is a new world beyond the sea—is that, too, all of the devil?" asked Andrea eagerly.

A passionate movement shook the Prior's powerful frame.

"All, I tell you—all!" he said, in his deep, rough, fatigued voice.

"All the arts, poetry, painting?"

"Unless they are devoted to the praise of God, these also are of the devil."

"And learning and philosophy?"

"What need has he of either who is fed by the Heavenly wisdom?"

Andrea shuddered.

"Father, when the peasants turn up antique statues in their vineyards and cornfields — beautiful things worth much money — the priests destroy them — are they right?"

"They are right," replied Savonarola. "What but evil can these heathen things bring? Have you not heard of the people of Siena who found a naked white woman in the ground and put her up in the piazza because of her beauty—and afterwards so many misfortunes fell on them that they broke the witch in pieces and buried her in Florentine territory? My son, fly these, forsake them, break them, grind them under your foot, so shall your soul become free and joyous, and circle like a bird round the presence of God. Eschew the heathen, forsake learning—'because of these things comes the wrath of God on the children of men'!"

"And it is all a snare, then," said Andrea—"Florence, so beautiful, so pleasant—all the splendour of Lorenzo dei Medici——"

Fra Girolamo interrupted, and his voice was like the clanging of a bronze-tongued bell.

"Speak not to me of Lorenzo dei Medici—the tyrant to whom I refused absolution on his death-bed; it was he, and such as he, who brought this city to slavery and corruption; it is his son who makes Florence as a den of thieves and blasphemers."

"Lorenzo was my friend, and I loved him," said the Conte gently.

"I know that thou didst love him," replied Savonarola, using the familiar form of address, "and to thy great hurt, Giovanni."

"He did much for Florence," sighed Della Mirandola.

The monk rose to his feet, his frame quivering, his face so distorted with wrath and hate as to appear demoniacal.

"Much for Florence? Ay, he embellished San Lorenzo and other churches for his own glory; he amused the people with wanton shows; he built his palaces and his gardens; employed his artists and his poets, and while they glorified him he was lavish with his praise. What else did he do? What else did Lorenzo dei Medici do? What of his lascivious life—what of his blasphemous, wanton songs? What of the sack of Volterra, the robbery of the dowry of the orphaned damsels, the revenge for the Pazzi conspiracy—thou knowest well enough, Conte della Mirandola, that when Lorenzo was on his death-bed these three things troubled even his dark soul. Yet, would he give back her liberty to Florence? Nay, he preferred to die without absolution—a tyrant, unrepentant as he had lived."

The Conte stood silent before this denunciation as if it had been directed at him; Andrea leant against the wall, feeling weak and helpless.

The monk's voice fell and softened; he laid one powerful hand on the young prince's rich sleeve, and his face, lately so fierce, took on an expression almost of tenderness, the brows lifted, and the brown eyes showed soft and affectionate.

"And thou, Giovanni, thou," he said, "why wilt thou not leave the world and follow me in the path of Christ? Thou art not like the others, and I would save thee from their fate; yea, I would pluck thee from the destruction of Florence and place thee safe within the

arms of God. Leave off this silk and gold, burn your books, and find peace in this poor habit I wear."

Mirandola's large eyes filled with tears.

" Father, I cannot, I have not the strength—the old allure is too strong—father, to-day, I might have heard you in the Duomo, but I went to Settignano to see a Greek there who had some gems to sell. I bought this." He took from his pocket the sardonyx Venus and held it out on his shaking palm.

Savonarola dropped his hand from the young man's shoulder.

" Alas ! " he said, " alas ! "

" But now I have no pleasure in the toy," continued the Conte. " Do with it as you will."

And he placed the yellow stone on the desk that was covered with the writings of the monk's vision.

" What shall I do with it ? " asked Fra Girolamo. " It is too hard to break or burn——"

" Would you destroy it ? " asked Andrea, quivering ; he could hardly bear to see the delicate gem in the coarse fingers of the monk.

" Why not ? " demanded Savonarola, instantly angered by the sign of opposition. " What is it but a wanton thing—a vanity ? "

" It is beautiful," said Andrea sullenly. His wave of reverence and belief in Fra Girolamo passed ; he felt now that he hated him.

" You think it beautiful ? " cried the monk, with glowing eyes. " You think the Duomo, with the coloured marbles, the statues, the paintings, the red dome, beautiful ? "

" Beautiful it is ! " exclaimed Andrea.

" To me it is but a pile of stones to keep out the sun and rain. I tell you that near the Torre San Niccolò, by the mill, there is a dirty brick chapel where the washerwomen come to say their prayers after they have been labouring with their linen in the Arno—that poor place, enriched by faith, is more lovely in God's sight than the Duomo or San Lorenzo."

He held out the sardonyx to the Conte.

" What wilt thou do with this, Giovanni ? "

" What you will," replied Mirandola. " As you say, father, it is but a vanity."

Savonarola laid the gem on the desk, and raising the heavy black crucifix that hung to the wooden rosary at his belt, dealt a blow of such ferocious strength and accuracy that the sardonyx was shattered like glass.

Andrea winced, and the angry colour stained his cheek.

" Ah, this pains you," said the Prior, sweeping the yellow fragments on to the floor. " But you can look on the bleeding features of Christ unmoved ! " and he sternly pointed to the canvas painting by Fra Angelico that he carried in procession.

Andrea's wrath died from him.

" Father, what shall I do ? " he asked, in despair.

" If you have your duty in the world, fulfil it as righteously as you may ; if you feel a spiritual call, enter the Church. Either way, learn self-abnegation, self-humiliation, self-sacrifice, cherish goodness and avoid knowledge—which is power, and that is of God."

" But, father," said Mirandola, " you aspire to power —you said once that you would cast out the Medici as Christ cast out the devils in the swine, and rule over all Florence."

The monk seemed to grow as he raised himself to his full height.

" All Italy, if it is willed ! " he cried. " But I am a prophet, and my visions are of God. When you have travailed and agonized as I have, you may aspire to power." Then in a less terrible tone he added :

" For you, Giovanni Pico, there are not many more years of life—I entreat you consider your soul."

" Father, I will," returned the young Conte earnestly. " When I can assume this habit without hypocrisy or unworthiness "—he touched the Prior's black and white robe—" I will come to you very joyously."

Savonarola sighed, and his harsh features took on a melancholy look.

" Now leave me, my sons," he said.

They kissed his hand and departed from his rooms.

The lay brother who had admitted them guided them to the convent door.

He told them that the Prior had not eaten since dawn, and then but a morsel of dry bread.

" He wears a hair shirt over a scourged and bleeding back," whispered the Dominican, " yet he is very sensitive to pain."

As they crossed the cloister of the dead a wild and crazy singing broke upon the sacred stillness.

Mirandola paused, startled.

" That is Fra Silvestro," explained the monk, " the brother who has convulsions and sees visions. The Prior loves him and cherishes him because of his prophecies."

They came out into the piazza, where the town lights mingled with the moon glow, and the Carnival songs of the passers-by drowned the mad chanting of the monk.

" Messere," said Andrea, " will you be a monk—and why did you give him the Venus ? "

" He is right—he is a man of God—a holy prophet," answered Mirandola, in an agitated voice.

But Andrea, shaken as he was, still revolted.

" I cannot believe it—not that way could I, at least, find peace ! "

They mingled with the careless crowd that thronged the Via Larga, and Andrea looked up at the moon. She brought him some comfort in her white remoteness, as did the feel of the eternal winds on his face as the hot night was broken by gusty breezes.

CHAPTER V

THE FESTA OF SAN GIOVANNI

Aprilis de Fiorivanti sat in the loggia of her father's house and watched the Carnival go by; she wore a black velvet mask, and held across the lower part of her face a fine silver veil.

Behind her stood Astorre della Gherardesca, to whom she had that day been betrothed, her father and his guests.

Aprilis thought she was happy; she felt that her long schooling and preparation for life were nearly over, and soon she would be free; she regarded her marriage as her charter of liberty; she was glad she was marrying a nobleman and she admired Astorre; for the rest, she did not think much of her future husband. Ever since she had been able to understand anything she had been taught and trained to desire and expect what had now befallen, a brilliant marriage arranged by her father, and rendered possible by his money and her beauty.

This beauty had been the one interest of her enclosed, guarded life; she had been given neither learning nor accomplishments—she had merely been told to cherish and value her loveliness.

All the women's talk that had flowed round her since

her mother's death gave her into the hands of her father's relatives had turned on this topic—beauty, and the power of beauty over the weakness of men. Aprilis was not stupid, she learnt her lesson thoroughly; she learnt more than she was ever taught, namely, that this beauty might obtain for her something more than the patrician marriage so dear to her father's heart.

She had read romances, she had heard tales, she had listened to the gossip of her guardians and friends, she knew something of what women did and what women could do in Florence.

Neither was she the colourless creature she seemed in her quiet aloofness; she was level-headed, intelligent, and ambition and passion and recklessness were all latent in Aprilis.

She had just passed her seventeenth year and was in everything completely womanly; indeed she was considered old for a Florentine bride, but her father in his caution had waited rather than take a husband beneath his ambitions for her.

Slightly leaning against one of the stone pillars of the loggia she looked up the Via Larga and felt her whole being tremble with nameless excitement.

The gaiety, the abandon, the licence of the Medicean Carnival, combined with the voluptuous softness of the June night, wove enchantment over Florence.

All commonplace sights of the day were lost in the lovely moonlit dark and the rays of the festival lamps; the Via Larga seemed an approach to lands of magic.

Music and laughter and songs, mingled curiously, filled the scented air; fantastic figures flashed into sight and disappeared again; revellers, hand in hand

like a chain of living flowers, danced across the spaces of the lamplight, then broke and scattered.

From the upper windows and terraces of the palaces, and from the open loggias looking on the street, came more lights, voices, the passing of women and men in and out the shadow, the sound of lute and viol da gamba.

Nothing was clearly seen—all was mysterious; songs from unseen singers, music from hidden musicians, figures flitting from shade to shade, masked, disguised, grotesque.

Aprilis rose above the calm happenings of her life; she would have liked to have been free to go into the street and join the elusive crowd, to mingle with the festival that laughed through the dark streets and palaces of the city.

Not for the first time did she feel irksome the strictness of the control exercised over her; she wondered if it would be different when she was married.

Removing her mask, that was hot and heavy, she glanced round at Astorre della Gherardesca. He was talking to Ser Rosario; she caught fragments of their conversation.

They spoke of the growing influence of Fra Girolamo, of his terrible prophecies of the destruction of Italy, his unpopularity at the Vatican and with the Medici, the feeble government of Piero, and how the great family had fallen in glory since the death of Lorenzo.

Astorre hated the Medici as they hated him; he was more than suspected of having been implicated in the famous Pazzi conspiracy, in which Guiliano, Lorenzo's brother, had lost his life.

Indeed, Astorre, in his hatred of the ruling family, was inclined to champion the Prior of San Marco, little as he had ever troubled about the tenets Fra Girolamo preached.

Ser Rosario, servile to the noble, agreed, praising Savonarola's sermons, and blaming the excesses of Piero dei Medici.

Aprilis was not interested; she looked at Astorre critically through the fine meshes of her silver veil.

He was handsome, dark, fiery, erect and thin, a bold, flashing hawk-like type, swarthy as a Moor, with eyes of Oriental brightness and fire. Aprilis wished he would trouble to court and caress her; her indifference to him might have changed if he had not been so indifferent to her; she sighed, looking at him curiously and wondering if he loved someone else.

She began to feel vaguely discontented with her marriage—what was a woman's life without love?

She hoped that she could make Astorre love her, or else that she would find some cavalier to love her in the prevailing fashion of Platonic love—the beautiful way in which the murdered Guiliano had loved Simonetta, the wife of his dear friend.

Uncertain longings stirred Aprilis; her present happiness seemed faint compared to what it might have been; the words of the Medicean Carnival song beat in her heart—to-night every one seemed singing them with a kind of desperate joyousness that was akin to pain:—

"Quant e bella giovinezza
Ma si fugge tuttavia
Chi vuol esser lieto, sia
Di doman non c'è certezza!"

It was the creed of Aprilis; she had been taught to cherish youth and beauty, the power of to-day, and to dread the passing of time, the uncertainty of to-morrow.

She took the veil from her lovely face and leaned out from the pillar of the loggia; a certain wistfulness touched her expression with melancholy.

One of the revellers stepped noiselessly from the engulfing shadow of the street into the trembling patch of light flung by the lanterns fixed in iron frames either side the door of the Palazzo Fiorivanti.

He wore a green robe and a mask fashioned in the shape of a wolf's muzzle; on his head was a pointed scarlet cap; his figure was tall and powerful, his hands concealed in his sleeves; he looked like a great beast of prey cloaked in man's attire.

Aprilis gazed at him fascinated; there was something both sinister and dominant in his grotesque appearance, which was heightened by the fact that he was alone and seemed apart from the festival, for he walked slowly and silently, instead of with the usual shouts and antics.

And presently he stopped altogether and stood facing the loggia.

Aprilis suddenly knew that he was looking at her; she smiled.

A crowd of dancers surrounding a chariot in which was a half-naked girl dressed as Bacchus and two gilded children astride a wine butt swept by, obscuring the wolf mask from Aprilis; but when they had passed he was still there with his animal's face, so horribly expressionless, turned towards her.

Astorre came to take his leave; Aprilis wondered if he was going to join the Carnival; she wished he would

take her with him. She would have liked to run over the Ponte Vecchio and along the Lung' Arno, linked arm in arm with others, waving a coloured lantern and singing to the full of her strength.

She stood up, dropping the silver veil and showing her loose white gown, which hung in close fine folds, and was embroidered all over with pale pink carnations and the falling petals of faded blossoms; a mantle of a dull rose colour hung from her shoulders; her fine curls were fluttering over her shoulders in front, and bound with a white ribbon in a thick sheaf between her shoulders, from which they escaped again and blew round her waist.

Astorre murmured some words of compliment and looked into her face which care had made as perfect as a complete flower.

Her skin was whitened, her lips and cheeks faintly stained with rose pulp, the delicate line of her eyebrows darkened, all accomplished with an exquisite art; between the gilded tendrils of hair on the low, smooth brow hung the single pearl on the gold thread.

Astorre was pleased with her; he pressed her hand tenderly and even with a certain reverence, and drew the sign of the cross over her bent head, giving her the benediction for the night.

He left the loggia, and Aprilis, without a word, was turning away to her cool bedroom overlooking the courtyard—her quiet bedroom where she would not be even able to hear the distracting sounds of the Carnival festivities.

But first she gave a sideway look into the lamplight without.

The man with the wolf mask was now leaning against the wall of the opposite palace; human hands, the strong brown hands of a soldier or an athlete, now showed beneath the animal's face.

He held a delicate little theorbo, on the dark wood of which showed the whiteness of ivory, and from the tinkling strings he picked the eternal burden of the Carnival :—

"Quant e bella giovinezza
Ma si fugge tuttavia
Chi vuol esser lieto, sia
Di doman non c'è certezza!"

He sang in a deep and pleasant voice.

Aprilis lingered as she passed out of the loggia into the house.

She thought perhaps it was poor Andrea Salvucci whom she knew adored her, or one of her other lovers who sighed at a distance and never came nearer than offering the holy water in church.

A feeling of regret seized her; she wondered if he could see her dress, which was copied from one of Messere Sandro di Botticelli's pictures, and if he knew that her wistful, remote, trembling smile was for him. Suddenly the melodious sounds of the Carnival were interrupted; harsh shouts and frightened shrieks rose from the direction of the Medici palace; mingled with these came the cries of "Palle! palle!" the rallying cry of the Medici.

Aprilis came back into the loggia; Ser Rosario, in his excitement, forgot to order her to her room.

"It must be a brawl between the Medici's partisans and the party of the friar," he said. "Messere della Gherardesca said that we might all come to being ruled

by Fra Girolamo—and rather he than Piero dei Medici, say I ! "

The tumult increased, the sounds of blows and the meeting of swords could be clearly heard ; people in Carnival dresses and masks, but with bare daggers in their hands, began to run up the street towards the Medici palace and the Duomo.

Still the masquer in green leant against the wall and pulled at the strings of his theorbo, and still he seemed to Aprilis to be looking at her and at nothing else through the increasing confusion. Astorre came running back to the Fiorivanti loggia.

He explained that two of the merrymakers had insulted a Dominican returning to San Marco, that a party of the Piagnoni had taken the friar's part, and that now a tumult was in progress before the gates of the Medici palace.

" There may be a revolt this very night," said Gherardesca. He had his hand on his sword, and his face was keen and eager.

" Santa Anna preserve us all ! " murmured Ser Rosario. " Where is Piero dei Medici ? "

Astorre gave a short, excited laugh.

" At Castello or Cafaggiuolo—wasting himself in some debauchery while the city slips from him——"

Ser Rosario was uneasy ; he had no wish for revolts nor conspiracy ; he had always lived very easefully under the Medici, and at heart the money-lender could have no real desire for the triumph of the friar, who regarded all worldly things as sinful.

" The Medici have too firm a seat," he muttered, reassuring himself. " The Medici——"

The sentence was broken on his lips ; with a mighty and sudden rush forward, Piagnoni and Mediceans swept in a great tumult up out of the darkness and swayed, struggling hand in hand, before the Fiorivanti palace.

" Get the women in ! " shouted Astorre ; and, drawing his sword, he leapt from the loggia into the fight.

Ser Rosario drove and hustled the women into the house.

" And Aprilis ? " he asked ; for some time he had not seen his daughter.

" Aprilis is in bed this hour," gasped the fat cousin, who was pale with fright.

But Aprilis was not—she had crept on to the step to have a better view of the tumult and a closer glance at the impassive stranger in the green robe and wolf's mask.

For a second she had a sense of almost delirious pleasure in standing alone and free in the street ; then when Astorre had come running back she had been afraid, and had crept into the shadow, so that he might not see her. When he had entered the loggia, she had tried to slip back into the house, but the sudden rush of the combatants had swept her away from her own doorstep. She cried out and hid her face, and ran before the crowd.

The wolf mask dropped his theorbo and hurried up to her ; he seized her arm in a grip firm enough to hurt, and drew her away into the dark doorway of the palace opposite.

" Take me back—please take me back," said Aprilis, frightened and angry.

For answer he skilfully twisted her rose-red mantle

tightly round her face, so as to blind, silence, and almost stifle her ; then lifting her and throwing her over his shoulder, he hurried down the first back turning he came to ; the struggles of Aprilis were of no more avail than the struggles of a bird in a trap.

CHAPTER VI

CARNIVAL NIGHT

STANDING beneath the wall of the beautiful gardens of the Medici, which lay at one end of the Via Larga, and near the Piazza San Marco, Cristofano degli Albizzi listened to the sounds, now loud, now indistinct, of the fray between the Piagnoni and the followers of the Medici.

Street brawls neither stirred nor frightened Cristofano; his hatred of the Medici was not to be expressed by blows exchanged in the quarrels of the Carnival. His family had once been greater than the Medici; from their street of palaces the Albizzi had lorded Florence until the day when Maro degli Albizzi had been banished the city, never, despite his heroic attempts, to behold more than a distant glimpse of its towers again.

So the famous house had fallen into insignificance in exile, earning their way with the fire of their sword, patching their fortunes with rich marriages; so fallen and from such greatness were they that Cristofano, their descendant, had difficulty in obtaining from Lorenzo dei Medici permission to return to Florence.

It had been granted on condition that he made no

claim to the ancient estates, and that he lived without the walls.

So Cristofano, who had inherited a few estates near Lucca from his mother, bought the villa near Santa Margharita al Montici, where he could look down on the city his forefathers had held and lost.

While Lorenzo lived, Cristofano had been nothing but an idler, mingling with the young Florentine nobles, learning the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, the verses of Lorenzo and Poligiano, interesting himself in the discovery of the antique and the revival of modern art.

But much that was pleasant in Florence died when Lorenzo died unrepentant at Careggi; it seemed as if the great days were over; people began to listen to Fra Girolamo, Cristofano among them, and his slumbering hatred of the Medici awoke now the family was represented by the person of Piero.

The noise of the tumult died away; a burst of music succeeded; it appeared as if the wild mirth of the Carnival had succeeded the brief fury of the fight—the cries of "Palle! palle!" became fainter; intoxicated songs rose into the summer air.

Cristofano wandered along the garden wall. Above his head hung tamerisk and privet, scenting the dark; the blackness of erect cypress trees rose against the moonlit skies; he paused to look in at the gate, and seemed to be peeping into enchantment. The white statues that Lorenzo had loved, and the young artists of Florence copied, gleamed beneath the trees of pomegranate, mulberry, lime, and beech, where the Magnifico had walked to listen to Ficino's translation of Plato.

Cold, impassive remote, these heathen deities, half

concealed among the living green, seemed to hold both menace and allure ; they had outlasted the men who fashioned them, and Lorenzo who had resurrected them : it seemed they might outlast Fra Girolamo who denounced them from the convent opposite. Cristofano surveyed them calmly ; older than Christ and as powerful, to him they were not false gods, for Cristofano had almost ceased to say " which, which ? " and could instead say " both."

The bewildering glitter of fire-flies came and went among the statues and trees ; there were no festival lamps here ; it was remote alike from Carnival and brawl.

Cristofano leant against the gate in idleness, and gazed down the moon-misty avenues with dreaming eyes.

Suddenly a living figure flitted across the stillness that had seemed unearthly ; it was that of a man in a green robe ; he carried over his shoulder a woman in a light mantle, and wore an animal mask.

Cristofano watched, still idly.

He wondered if these were members of the Medici household, or revellers who had broken into the garden ; then, so quickly did they pass into the deep shade, he wondered if he had seen them at all, or if they were not mere illusions of the heathen garden. The evening was wearing late, and at midnight he was due at Cafaggiuolo.

He had not much hope from this interview with Piero dei Medici, but the thought of it spurred and interested him ; he wanted to be able to tell the Magnifico to his face what his government was doing for Florence ; the Albizzi loved the city from which his family had been exiled so long ; of late he had had dreams of greater

glory, of nobler destinies for her than she could ever attain under the Medici.

Fra Girolamo was a fine counterbalance to Piero, an influence to be used to cast the Medici from the gates, but Cristofano had no desire to put Savonarola where Lorenzo had ruled.

Neither was he sure that the aims of the Prior of San Marco were any nearer his own than the aims of Piero ; it was himself that Cristofano dreamed of as ruling Florence, nay, Tuscany, and of bringing here the golden age Ludovico Sforza was trying to inaugurate in Milan.

The project was too ambitious to be breathed, but not so ambitious as to discourage the boldness and vastness of Cristofano's dream.

True, he was a penniless nobody, but he carried a greater name than the Medici ; his family had ever produced warriors and nobles, while the founder of Piero's house had sold herb medicines—hence his name and the golden pilules on the shield—the " palle " of the war-cry—and their fortunes had been built on commerce.

Ludovico Sforza was the grandson of a peasant ; Alessandro Borgia had come to Rome a poor stranger—Cristofano thought he might equal these in luck and in achievement.

He made his way down the Via Larga, from where the roysterers had fled, and where the black-masked brethren of the Misericordia were taking away the wounded and the dead.

The cobbles were stained with blood ; broken daggers lay among the trampled confetti, the burst bladders, the fool's staffs, the dead flowers that strewed the road.

The lights were out in the black pile of the Palazzo Medici, and the huge gates were shut ; only, either side the portals flared a great resin torch set in the iron bracket, illuminating, with a smoky light, the stone shield with the arms of the Medici.

" So begins the Carnival," thought Cristofano. He looked up with contempt at the shield in the torchlight, and choosing his way so as to avoid the blood in the runnels of the road, hastened on towards the Piazza del Duomo.

There the Carnival was still at full height ; a fair was in progress in the Piazza San Giovanni behind the Batistery, whose wonderful gilded doors threw back the coloured light of hundreds of lanterns.

Cristofano passed through the crowd and turned down the Borgo San Lorenzo.

Here, near the lesser dome of the great Medicean church, was a little insignificant trattoria, whose one oil-lamp burned dimly in the dark interior. Cristofano entered and demanded of the man who stood behind the rows of flasks on the little counter if the horse was ready ?

The tavern-keeper replied that it was, and left the shop at the back, crying out to the servant.

Cristofano poured out a glass of the bright chianti into one of the thick tumblers, and drank.

" Cristofano ! "

He turned quickly, hearing his name.

Andrea Salvucci came from behind one of the wooden tables.

Cristofano smiled, finished his wine, and stared into the empty glass.

"Do not go to Cafaggiuolo," said Andrea, in a low voice.

"You are here to tell me that?" asked Cristofano, raising his eyes.

"Yes, you told me that you kept your horse here—do not go."

Cristofano's full mouth curved almost into a laugh.

"Now, why, my Andrea?"

"Ah," said Andrea. "It is so very obviously a trap—a trick."

"Nay," replied the Albizzi quietly. "Piero is not tyrant of Florence, nor are we in the days of the Duke of Athens. He can neither murder me nor imprison me. He would not dare, because he has not enough power."

"He would dare anything, I think," said Andrea. "Some accident——"

"As for that," interrupted Cristofano, "I am prepared," and he turned up the soft red sleeve of his robe, showing the fine mesh of steel mail beneath.

Andrea was not convinced.

"It will not save you from the Medici," he returned. "Nor can I understand why you go. Cannot he see you in the Via Larga?"

"I go for two reasons," said Cristofano. "First, because he does not expect I shall dare to come, and I wish to show him how an Albizzi values a Medico; and, secondly, because I wish to gather from his own lips what he means to do in Florence. He is not clever; I shall sound him."

They had been speaking very low as they leant together over the dirty little counter under the trembling

light of the tiny lamp that sent a dim radiance over the two handsome faces; now Andrea lowered his voice even more.

"What do you mean to do?" he asked, with a certain eagerness that was almost wistful. "Are you working for Fra Girolamo? Do you mean to set him up in Piero's place?"

"Would you join me if I did?" demanded Cristofano instantly. "We might go to Milan—Ludovico Sforza——"

"I am no ally worth asking for," smiled Andrea.

But the Albizzi wished as many men as possible bound to the cause he meant eventually to make his —wholly—his own.

"I tell you Savonarola's party is more powerful than you might guess," he answered. "Just now they drove the Piagnoni before them for insulting a friar in the front of the Medici Palazzo."

"The Pope will protect the Medici."

"Fra Girolamo will defy the Pope."

"But will Florence?"

"Why not?" said Cristofano indifferently. "Perhaps it were not impossible to dethrone the Borgia—do not his deeds stink before Christendom?"

"And would you make a friar lord of Florence?" asked Andrea incredulously.

"I do not say so," replied Cristofano quickly. "Fra Girolamo is a saint, a prophet—maybe no statesman."

"Is he either saint or prophet?" asked the other, in an agitated tone. "Is he not ambitious—would he not rule—would he not be in the Pope's place, nay, greater than the Pope?"

"You never believed in him," said Cristofano; he poured out more wine and drank it slowly.

"Listen." Andrea leaned closer and spoke eagerly. "Yesterday I went with the Conte to San Marco. We saw the Prior and spoke with him. He is terrible—inhuman."

"Yes, he is terrible," agreed Cristofano, "but he can be gentle too—if you see him in the fields at Fiesole with his monks, preaching to them of gentleness."

"Gentleness! He hates the world."

"Because he loves heaven."

"I liked him not," said Andrea, "he had no comfort to give me—but to forsake the world."

"Why do you not?" smiled Cristofano.

"I should stifle in San Marco—if I could believe——"

"Ah, *if*!—but you were always too full of doubts," interposed the other.

"You too have had your doubts," returned Andrea quickly. "What did we speak of but yesterday?"

"I do not let my doubts ride me," said the Albizzi coldly. "I make of them an amusement, not a scourge."

Andrea saw a fire and a determination in his face he had never thought those serene and dreamy features could express.

In some oblique way this look of resolution and pride, flashing for a moment from the clear eyes of his friend, repulsed him.

"I will not intrigue for your friar," he answered. "I had as lief the Medici as him. But the Conte della Mirandola will die a monk."

"The Conte della Mirandola!" repeated Cristofano softly.

" He has grown disgusted with beauty and with learning. I heard him tell the Prior that when he could bring himself to it he would assume the Dominican habit."

The young Albizzi marvelled.

" And this was Lorenzo's friend and the follower of Ficino and Poliziano ! "

" Angelo Poliziano has repented too," said Andrea, with a dry smile ; " he too has burnt his wanton books, and taken down the picture of his lady from his room —listen, the Duke of Milan's man, Leonardo da Vinci, painted it, and it was marvellous, you thought she breathed. And there she hung above his desk ever since she died in Milan, three years gone by, and now he has taken her down and there is a black cross and a white Christ in her place."

" It seems we are likely to have a reign of holiness," remarked Cristofano. " And yet you still do not believe in the friar ? "

" I know not what I believe," answered Andrea, turning away. " At present, what I have to think of is that if the Conte take the monk's robe I must look elsewhere for a livelihood."

Cristofano pressed his hand affectionately.

" You shall not lack it when Savonarola and I have restored the Republic," he whispered. Then looking towards the open door, where his horse had for some moments been waiting, he added aloud :

" Come up to Santa Margharita to-morrow evening, and I will relate to you my adventures."

Andrea shook his head sadly.

" I will come," he answered, " but I shall not find you."

Cristofano smiled, and hastened out of the tavern. As he lifted himself into the saddle, he thought, "I shall be late"; but it did not displease him to keep the Magnifico waiting.

He rode slowly through the crowded streets where the Carnival was rioting till the dawn—where it would riot indeed, unchecked, in any kind of licence, during the eight days of the *festa*.

Women, masked, unmasked, cloaked, and half nude, leant from balconies, from sedan chairs, and stretched up their arms from the roadside, asking him where he was going, and why he would not stay?

He was pelted with flowers, with confetti and sweetmeats, sprinkled with scented water from silver squirts, and struck, smartly and lightly, by the coloured swinging fool's bladders.

He laughed aside the jesters and left the city by the Porta San Gallo, setting his horse briskly up the hill of Pratolino.

As soon as he had passed the walls a stillness that seemed deathlike succeeded the feverish babble of the city.

The few cottages on the roadside were closed and dark, the vineyards and orchards lay undisturbed beneath the moon that floated free with an almost startling brilliancy in the vast expanse of the heavens that sparkled like blue crystal.

Honeysuckle and wild roses mingled with the clematis in the hedges of nut and hawthorn, the perfume was lifted faintly on the wandering night airs.

Cristofano passed no one, the solitude was as complete as had been the multitudinous noises of the city.

As his horse slowly took the hills that mounted one after the other towards Pratolino, Cristofano continually looked back at the lights of Florence, and indulged his thoughts of one day ruling there as his forefather, Maro degli Albizzi, had ruled.

Once he was on level ground he touched up the horse, and quickly covered the white winding road that twisted to Cafaggiuolo.

The Medici villa stood flat in a sweep of rich woodland, surrounded by the hills and valleys of a superb hunting country; the white square of it showed clear in the moonlight, the shadows black beneath the buttress and the turrets of the tower.

The gates, guarded by a phalanx of cypress trees, stood open, left so, Cristofano thought, for his arrival; he entered and rode across the short length of grass to the palace door.

A man was waiting there; he came forward silently, and took Cristofano's bridle.

"Messere degli Albizzi?" he asked.

"Yes," said Cristofano, "the Magnifico is expecting me, is he not?"

"You are waited for, Messere," replied the servant.

Cristofano dismounted.

He glanced up at the house, which was in darkness, and appeared deserted; he had expected instead to see a festival in progress; Piero dei Medici did not live quietly.

The servant whistled, and a boy came up and led away the horse.

The man then turned into the house, and Cristofano followed him. In the entrance-hall his guide took a

small lamp from a table, and respectfully bid the Albizzi follow him upstairs.

On the top floor he opened a door which led into a fair-sized apartment, which the uncertain beams of the faint flame showed to be richly furnished.

" Where is Piero dei Medici ? " demanded Cristofano.

" In Florence, Messere," replied the servant, " but as soon as he returns he will see you."

With that he quickly lit two candles on the mantelshelf, then left the room.

Cristofano stood undecided a moment, then, angry at this reception, strode to the door.

As he found it locked, he could but smile at his own folly.

CHAPTER VII

THE MASK OF THE WOLF

THE masquer soon put Aprilis down, for her weight cumbered his flight, and taking both her hands in his right one, hurried her over the paving-stones, so that her feet were hurt.

She tried to cry out, to struggle, but the mantle stifled and blinded her; she could only stumble along helplessly, gasping and sobbing in her throat.

Presently her abductor caught her up again; she felt herself roughly held against his shoulder and chest; she could feel beneath his robe the hardness of steel; she heard the quick intake of his breath, the breathing of a man almost exhausted.

With sudden swiftness she released her hands from the mantle, and thrusting them against his shoulder with all her force, made a violent effort to free herself.

Her desperate movement broke his grip; she felt her feet touch the ground; she staggered a few paces and disentangled herself from the mantle.

With a gasp of relief she breathed the fresh air; as she had guessed from the silence, she was no longer in the street; a garden, illuminated only by the moonlight was

around her ; she stood in a dark avenue of ilex, with a white statue behind her breaking the blackness of the shade.

Seeing the monstrous figure of the wolf-mask, which the uncertain light made more grotesque, standing there beside her, she began to run.

But the stranger was instantly at her side, and had grasped her arm in his powerful fingers.

Aprilis stood motionless, quivering.

She endeavoured to collect her confused, angry thoughts ; if she could but escape this man for a few minutes, she believed she would be safe, for she knew she could not be far from home, and that probably they had already missed her, and were searching Florence.

But she saw no chance of escaping her captor, even for ten seconds ; his forceful grip was like a ring of pain on her arm.

She looked at him with hatred.

" Astorre della Gherardesca will kill you for this," she said.

" It would be a sweet death," returned the wolf-mask in sentimental tones, " since it would be incurred for your sake."

This voice, cultured, but deep and rather rough, disguised a little by the silk screen that formed the lower part of the mask, confirmed Aprilis in her intuition that this was no one whom she knew.

She stood silent, her astuteness of a woman and her subtlety of a Florentine busy scheming how to meet the situation.

" Do you regret the Gherardesca ? " added the stranger in a beguiling voice. " Do you not know that

you are far too wonderful to belong to him ? And too wonderful to stay in the Palazzo Fiorivanti, my Aprilis."

" Ah, you know my name ? " said Aprilis ; her terror and confusion diminished ; she felt on her own ground with one who used the language of homage and devotion ; the situation was more or less in her own hands.

" I know everything about you," returned the wolf-mask, " except how many worshippers you have in Florence ; and who can count the sands of the sea ? "

This language of courtly compliment, given in an ardent masculine voice, was not displeasing to Aprilis ; she would have liked Astorre to woo her in this fashion. The danger of her situation ceased to appal her ; she smiled, shaking back her disordered curls.

" Do I know you ? " she asked.

" You have seen me, I think ; you do not know me, —but I know you, Madonna Aprilis."

" How ? " she questioned.

" By no magic, dear, by loving watchfulness."

He put his free arm round her shoulders, and drew her gently towards him.

Aprilis breathed hard.

" You had better, for your own sake," she said, " take me back."

He did not enforce his hold, but the muzzle of the hideous mask was almost touching her colourless cheek.

" Why—for my sake ? "

" Astorre della Gherardesca will kill you, Messere," she repeated.

She thought he laughed, but his voice as he answered was quite steady.

" Do you love him ? "

Aprilis lifted her delicate eyebrows and her slender shoulders.

"Does he love you?" asked the stranger.

"Is that the question?" replied Aprilis. "I am to be his wife."

"No," said the masquer quietly, "you never will be, Madonna Aprilis."

Her courage ebbed again, the dark trees, the white moonlight, the powerful and fantastic figure that held her captive, overwhelmed her spirit with a sense of a destiny not to be escaped.

She shuddered, and pulled the mantle closer about her breast and throat.

"Poor lady!" exclaimed her captor; and now there was a ring of sarcasm in his humble tone. "So you regret the Gherardesca—and your pleasant home and Ser Rosario, the old tyrant with his money bags, and Monna Costanza, the fat cousin, and Monna Lucia, the fat aunt?"

She was surprised by his knowledge of her life, which suddenly seemed very distasteful in the retrospect; she asked herself why she wanted to go back—was it not a purely conventional feeling? None of them, from her father to Astorre, had done anything to win her affection, the life had always irked her, the marriage she had been so glad to achieve had only been a means of escape; she had always wanted adventures—here was one; she had always longed to test her power—here was the chance if she had the courage and wit she had believed herself to possess.

The masquer, who had been observing her closely, loosened her arm and lightly took her hand.

" I think you do not greatly want to return," he remarked shrewdly, " and you are right, in the Fiorivanti Palazzo you are a pearl in an iron casket."

" But in the Villa Gherardesca I shall have at least a silver casket," smiled Aprilis.

" You would have a prettier prison, perhaps," he returned, " but it would be the same life."

" No," said Aprilis, " for I shall make Astorre do as pleases me."

He laughed outright now.

" That you never would, Madonna Aprilis "

She flushed in anger, and gave him a glance of contempt.

" Do you doubt my power over men ? " she asked softly.

" Over Astorre, yes ; for he is already in love with Madonna Olimpia, who is the wife of Sansovino of Pisa."

Her colour deepened ; she hated Astorre, and she hated the man who spoke to her ; again she lost all fear.

" How do you know that ? " she demanded.

" You would have known it—in common with all Florence—if you had not been locked away so closely."

She tried to rally her pride, which was hurt, a little because Astorre had a lover, and a great deal because she had not known about it.

" What is there for you to regret ? " insinuated the wolf-mask. " You must have a dozen lovers finer than the Gherardesca."

" I have many lovers," returned Aprilis coldly, " but they have never come nearer to me than the tips of my outstretched hand ; nor would you stand so close "

—and her eyes were dangerous—" were it not by force, Messere."

He laughed again, as if pleased.

" Do you still want to return ? " he asked, and he moved away, leaving her free ; a deceptive freedom, as she knew, for he had but to take a step to capture her again.

She panted a little, pressing her hands together in agitation ; she guessed she was in the Medici gardens, near to her father's home, but if she shrieked (and little would she be able to shriek before the wolf-mask stifled her cries), who would hear her—who, hearing, would trouble ?

She knew that a woman's shrieks were not much heeded on a night of Carnival.

The thought of her return made her shiver ; she felt that none of the household would be gentle with her—the adventure would be imputed to her as a fault ; and it was true that she had crept down to the door when she should have gone up to her room ; she was wholly doubtful as to the attitude of Astorre.

" Do you wish to return ? " repeated the stranger, closely observing her doubts and distresses.

She turned on him with a touch of fierceness.

" Yes, I wish to return, for what can I achieve better than a marriage with Astorre della Gherardesca ? "

" I will bring you a finer marriage," he returned, with sudden eagerness. " I will bring you love and riches and power, Madonna Aprilis."

" How is that possible ? " she faltered.

" All is possible to me," he replied arrogantly.

A sudden awful fear that he might be the devil or an

emissary of the devil, caused her knees to shake under her ; she crossed herself.

He saw the terror in her movement.

" I am nothing unholy," he said, and he drew a cross from his bosom. " On this I swear I will not harm you. Listen to me, Madonna, I swear on the bone of San Piero, which is set in this cross, that you shall not be touched, save by your own consent."

He spoke so softly, so tenderly and with such sincerity that Aprilis was reassured ; his voice had a powerful effect on her, an effect almost of enchanting her senses.

" What do you mean to do with me ? " she asked, with a helpless gesture.

" You still do not trust me, beautiful Aprilis."

" I do not know your name and quality, I have never seen your face—you have used violence to me, why should I trust you ? "

But as she spoke she gave him the sad little trembling smile with which she was wont to reward her lovers at the church door and beneath the loggia.

" My name is a good name," he answered, " and my quality is not mean. Could you love me, Aprilis ? I would give you everything you wished."

She stood silent ; the night-wind caught her fine locks and blew them out against the ilex trees ; as she put up her hand to them her fingers touched a bare forehead.

" Oh, my *ferroniera* ! " she cried in instinctive distress ; " my pearl ! I have lost it ! "

She stood with her hands to her brow, swaying on her feet ; in a bewildering flash she remembered all the preparations for her wedding : the chests full of gowns, the caskets of jewels, the dress she was to have worn on her

marriage day, the pearls Astorre had given her, all her own loved possessions. "I shall lose all these," she thought, and the pain of it forced the tears into her eyes.

"What are you grieving for, Aprilis?" asked the stranger.

"My pearl—I have lost my pearl," she murmured, "and all my gems and wedding gifts—oh, Messere, you have done me a great wrong!"

He took her in his arms and she was too distressed and tired to resist.

"If you will come with me I will give you a finer husband and finer jewels than those you have lost, Aprilis."

She felt very weary, she tried to draw away from his hard, steel-clad arms, but the effort was feeble.

"If I refuse, Messere?" she asked faintly.

"Bacchus, Madonna, you will go just the same," he answered, and there was a note of impatience and brutality in his voice, which had hitherto been so low and coaxing.

"Let me see your face," said Aprilis; "to me you are still a wolf—can I love a wolf, Messere?" and she laughed feebly.

They had walked a few paces beyond the white statue and the ilex shade, and were now in the full moonlight.

The stranger took off his fantastic-pointed red cap and unfastened the strings of the mask; with the animal's head in his hand he stood looking at her and smiling.

She had an instant impression that she had seen him before, and yet he was certainly a stranger.

The face was superb in youth, in health, in beauty and

in pride, swarthy in complexion, with thick, dark chestnut hair, large eyes with heavy, drooping lids, a nose slightly arched, and full, bold lips ; the slight coarseness of the type was emphasized by the heavy lines of the chin, and redeemed by no touch of intellectual power nor spiritual power in the expression, which was frankly and pleasantly soulless, and might easily be brutal.

In the thick neck, the low-set ears, the small, compact head, were the signs of the athlete, as were also in his arched, deep chest, his wide shoulders and slender hips.

He stood firm as a thing of bronze or iron, expressing in every line material power and arrogance ; now he was unmasked he was as much the animal as he had been when disguised with the wolf's head.

He did not daunt Aprilis ; the voluptuous delicacy of her type responded to the masculine dominance of his ; he pleased her more than the scholar Andrea, more than the thin, eager Astorre, more than any man she had ever seen.

She returned his smile, instinctively putting forth her charms as the flower opens to the sun.

" You are not afraid of me, are you, Madonna Aprilis ? " he asked.

" No," she answered quickly, " because you swore by the bones of San Piero not to harm me."

He was looking at her keenly, with pleasure and amusement.

" Will you kiss me ? " he asked.

" Not now," said Aprilis.

He laughed.

" Not now, then," he returned.

He took her hand and led her rapidly across the garden.

Aprilis was struggling for composure with which to face the situation.

She would rather marry this man than Astorre; she would rather follow him than return to her father's house.

But could she trust him?—she thought so, because of the oath he had sworn on the sacred relics.

Did he love her?

At this thought she felt the blood glow hot all over her body; she could easily come to love him, she thought—she had been fashioned to respond to such a man's wooing.

But her shrewdness held in check her surrender; she trembled as she considered how he might use her—why had he chosen this rough way of taking her, why was he disguised, why was she still ignorant of his name?

As she was hastened along through the darkness of the garden, helpless in his grip, and seeming a creature of ethereal delicacy beside his bulk and power, her mind was working rapidly, balanced between despair and anger at her situation and the powerful instinct that attracted her to the adventure and the man. He hurried her to another gate shaded with overhanging beech trees, from beyond which she could glimpse a dark street and the poor gleams of the oil lamps at the corner.

Faintly came the sound of the Carnival, all the varied noises combining to a distant hum, like the boom of an indistinct melody.

The stranger opened the gate and drew Aprilis through the portals into the dark and lonely street.

He put his face close to hers ; she felt his breath and his rough hair on her brow ; with clenched hands and narrowed eyes she stood taut.

" Chi vuol esser lieto, sia
Di doman non c'è certezza,"

he muttered.

He took her chin in his hand and turned her face towards him.

She flushed and set her teeth.

" I will not be your leman or the toy of any man, Messere," she said, and her eyes defied him. " And if you do me any harm there are three people who will be revenged on you—San Piero, to whom you swore, my father, and Astorre della Gherardesca."

He answered with a certain carelessness.

" I will not harm you, sweet ; you are safe for me."

And then he stooped and kissed her.

She had known no kisses save those of Astorre, cold on her brow or hand ; this, full on her mouth, was a kiss such as she had dreamed of when her thoughts had wandered from her prosaic surroundings through the ways of romance.

Her whole being trembled, it seemed as if her soul leant towards him and clung to him gratefully ; then, as he released her, and turned away, she hated him passionately as for some vague but deep wrong. Taking a whistle from the same gilt chain on which the crucifix hung, he blew softly three times, and a coach came up from the darkness beyond the street lamp. As it stopped before them the stranger replaced his mask.

" I will not go," shuddered Aprilis, with sudden violent repulsion when she saw him open the door.

For answer he lifted her easily over the step and closed the door on her protests.

The windows were curtained in leather, and she was in complete darkness.

Half dreading, half longing for the wolf-mask to follow her, she trembled into a corner.

The coach started, and no one joined her ; she found both the doors secured against her efforts to open them, and crouched back in her corner ; she told herself she was glad that the stranger should ride without. At thought of his kiss she trembled all over.

Despite the jolting of the coach she went on her knees and prayed to the Madonna and Saint Ama to protect her helplessness.

" And restore my pearl if it seems good to thee," added Aprilis.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILVER KEY

APRILIS fell asleep in the coach; she was awakened by the mingled gleam of torch and dawnlight on her face.

The carriage had stopped, the door was open, and two men, who seemed servants, were helping her into the open air.

Aprilis drew the pink mantle over her face with a gesture of pride; her confused senses cleared, and she looked round for the wolf-mask.

He was not there; the coachman sat alone on the seat. Aprilis shivered as she perceived that she had made her journey alone; the tears stung her tired eyes as she looked about her furtively.

The place was unknown to her; she beheld stretches of open country, misty beneath the rising sun, a house with a battlemented top and tower, a garden full of tall trees.

The door stood open, and Aprilis was led through; she found herself in an entrance-hall, shuttered and dark; a little black boy held a torch that glanced on painting and gilding of wall and ceiling and the dim whiteness of marble stairs.

" Where is your master ? " asked Aprilis.

" He will be here very soon, Madonna," replied one of the servants. " Meanwhile, he bids you take your ease."

" My ease ? " repeated Aprilis scornfully ; she stood shivering at the foot of the stairs, reluctant to ascend ; at this moment even the dull home, the tyrannical father and the spying, scolding guardians seemed desirable. A woman came from the back of the house with a lamp in her hand ; she was young and had a pleasant face ; Aprilis glanced at her with relief, and yet hardened too, and stood in a proud silence while the stranger spoke to her.

" This is Madonna Aprilis di Ser Rosario Fiorivanti, is it not ? I am Bonaventura, and you must be pleased to command me."

Aprilis said nothing.

One of the servants drew aside the woman and whispered to her ; she nodded and laughed a little, then joined Aprilis, asking her, with great deference, to follow her ; alert and on the defensive, Aprilis came. The little lamp her guide carried showed her some glimpses of the splendour of the house ; this encouraged her ; at least her adventure was no sordid one ; she was in the palace of a great noble ; as she thought of the masquer she coloured hotly, and her whole body trembled.

After four short flights of the marble stairs, the woman stopped and unlocked a door. Aprilis followed her into a large room. Bonaventura lit a lamp of enamelled silver that stood on the mantelshelf, and the whole chamber was illuminated with a soft clear light.

Aprilis had never been in an apartment so beautiful.

The low ceiling was carved and gilded, as was the mantelpiece, the floor of polished yellow red sandstone, strewn with silk rugs, the furniture dark, simple and rich ; before the windows hung silk tapestries, with the story of Bacchus and Ariadne woven in the glowing threads.

On a table, inlaid with gold and white marbles, stood a supper service of lustred Gubbio ware, wine in a white bottle with a gold stopper, mineral water in a green bottle with a silver stopper, cakes on a platter of pierced silver gilt, and dishes of cherries, strawberries, and peaches embedded in snow, and covered in green leaves.

" Will you be pleased to eat ? " asked Bonaventura humbly.

Aprilis shook her head.

With a pretty coaxing air the woman proffered one of the plates of fruit.

Aprilis refused them, but could not avoid exclaiming :

" Peaches now ! I have never seen ripe peaches on the first day of San Giovanni's Carnival ! "

" They are sent from the south," said Bonaventura, submissively returning them to the table. " Is there anything else Madonna would like ? "

Aprilis looked at her keenly.

" What do you know of me ? " she asked.

" Nothing except that your ladyship chooses to be here," was the deferential reply.

" Why do you think I choose to be here ? " demanded Aprilis.

" Is that for Bonaventura to wonder at ? I am here to be your servant."

Aprilis detected the cunning behind the sweetness of the tones ; she saw at once that it would be quite useless

to try and question this woman either as to her master or his intentions.

"Will you repose a little?" asked Bonaventura. "All is ready for you, Madonna."

"How do I know," asked Aprilis sharply, "that I may repose in safety?"

The woman took from the embroidered satchel that hung before her gown a long, slender key and a little dagger in a case set with turquoise stones.

"My master sent a message that he had sworn by San Piero not to harm you, Madonna, and he sends you these—a means of defence—and a means of escape—for this is the key of these apartments. Now will you see your room?"

Aprilis took the two little objects with reviving courage, and followed Bonaventura to the inner door, which she opened, hastening deftly ahead to light another lamp here.

This chamber was a small cabinet filled with books, paintings, a large desk, and several instruments unknown to Aprilis.

Another door led into a bedroom, beyond which was an alabaster-lined bathroom, where the violet and white lilies of Florence grew in the sunk pool of a little fountain.

Having shown all this with a rapid flash of the lamp Bonaventura again paused in the bedchamber and asked Aprilis what she wanted for her pleasure or her comfort.

Without answering, Aprilis took the lamp from her and went to the tall mirror that hung at the foot of the bed.

The clearly polished surface showed her a figure dishevelled, the flowered gown pulled awry, the rose-pink mantle crumpled, the gilt hair, usually so carefully

tended, disordered and rough, her face haggard and even stained with tears, the powder lost from her cheeks, the rose-bloom from her lips.

Never, in all her short days, had her cherished beauty been so harshly treated.

Tears of mortification sprang to her eyes, wetting the long lashes afresh ; she stamped her foot with rage.

" Yes, I do need something," she said. " I look a hag and a witch—bring me what you have for a lady's toilet."

Bonaventura was all understanding and sympathy.

" Everything is in the bathroom—everything, Madonna ! " she cried, running about and lighting the candles. " Shall I come and comb and bathe her ladyship ? "

" No," said Aprilis. " I will wait on myself."

" Then I will leave her ladyship until the morning. A peaceful night, and good repose, and may San Piero guard you ! "

So saying, she bowed herself out and was gone.

" It is nearly day ; I will not go to bed," thought Aprilis.

But left thus alone in the bedchamber she was conscious of a lassitude not to be resisted ; she yawned as she pulled the white ribbon from her sheaf of tresses ; she had no longer the curiosity to examine the bathroom and the treasures therein that Bonaventura had spoken of.

She rubbed her eyes like a sleepy child, and her prayers, as she dropped on her knees by the strange bed, were incoherent and short.

She put out all the candles, but left the lamp burning,

and laid herself, dressed as she was, on the purple coverlet of the bed, which smelt fragrantly of spikenard and orris root.

In a little while she was asleep, heavily, dreamlessly asleep, with the careless inconsequence of youth, her little hand beneath her flushed cheek, and the admired locks for once forgotten and scattered like handfuls of gold silk across the square white silk pillow, the little dagger sheath in her other hand, which lay across her bosom.

When she awoke she did not move, for fatigue and lassitude still enchained her limbs, and her mind was for a moment empty of memory.

Sunshine streamed into the room, but did not penetrate the bed, which was heavy as a catafalque, draped with violet silk, and low on the ground, so that to lie there was like lying in some deep cavern under the sea, and watching the sunlight filtering through the waves overhead, for so did it filter from the high window through the folds of the scented silk curtains.

Aprilis stretched herself luxuriously, then sat up, remembering the adventure and that she was no longer within reach of the shrill voices of Monna Costanza and Monna Lucia.

For the first morning in her life there was no one to worry her, scold her, or gossip to her; she was deliciously alone.

But as she put her feet to the floor fear tempered this joy of liberty.

The shutters were open; she was sure that they had been closed last night; the lamp by the bedside was out; she took it up and shook it, finding it full of oil;

she was convinced that it had been extinguished, and therefore that someone had entered the room while she slept.

She smiled scornfully at the long silver key which she had kept beneath her pillow—what use was it if there was a pass-key ?

She got off the bed and looked round the room with curiosity.

It was a chamber that greatly pleased her luxurious fancy, a chamber such as Ser Rosario's taste could never have accomplished.

The walls were white, with painted panels of delicate arabesques ; under the ceiling, which was divided into sunk panels in gilded frames, which were painted with views of landscapes and castles, ran a frieze of nymphs and unicorns, embraced by wreaths of grapes and roses that smiling boys upheld at intervals.

At the foot of the magnificent purple bed was the full-length mirror in a frame of gilded wood ; either side a huge press, carved a finger's-depth with figures and flowers. Aprilis found both locked. Before the flat window hung a thin curtain of peach-coloured silk which gave the sunlight a soft and restful hue ; beneath it was a long coffer, also locked, and two chairs of black wood and burnished leather.

Near the bed was a small table of green marble and a *prie-Dieu* with a deep rose-coloured velvet cushion ; above the *prie-Dieu* hung an ivory crucifix, an alabaster stoup of holy water, and a small and lovely picture of the Holy Family in a grove of lemons. Silk rugs were on the floor, and between the bed and the door was a low, classic-shaped couch piled with cushions of tapestry

and brocade in all colours of gold, red, and purple. Above this, on a shelf of black wood, was a Plato and an Aristotle, bound in tooled leather, and above them a head of Minerva in porphyry.

The air was most fresh and exquisite with perfume, and Aprilis noticed the fine workmanship of every little article, the silver candlesticks, the copper lamp, the terra-cotta vase of red roses beside the *prie-Dieu*.

She went into the bathroom, which was lit by windows of gold glass, and was filled with an amber-coloured light; scarlet and black carp twisted in and out of the iris roots in the little clear fountain in the centre that splashed softly in delicate drops; beyond, the huge sunk bath was filled with constantly running water; above it the nude marble-figure of an athlete anointing his arm, showed in a shadowed alcove; either side marble shelves held pots and jars of white porcelain, blue jasper, lustred majolica, and clear glass, containing unguents, perfumes, and lotions.

Either side the bath three steps led to an embrasure skilfully lit from above, in each of which was a flowering rose tree; in one a couch covered with soft silk cushions, in the other a gilt table and chair.

Aprilis sighed with pleasure; such luxury was what she had always dreamed of; she thought with contempt of Astorre, who would never be able to give her this; she was glad she had escaped a marriage that would have been a mere sacrifice of her beauty: thinking of the splendid promises of the stranger in the light of his splendid house, she straightened with pleasure and pride.

Curiosity brought her back into the bedroom to gaze out of the window.

A sweep of superb country—valleys, glades, woods, and hills—all encircled with purple mountains and bare of house or churches, was before her; evidently she looked on the back of the villa.

The sun streamed brightly over the fresh beauty of the landscape, and Aprilis felt her heart bounding excitedly in response to the gorgeous loveliness of the scene.

Now she passed into the library, or cabinet; here the window was on the other side, and too high set for her to see from; she gave an idle glance at the books, which were all religious or classical, and went into the front room again.

This had two windows, one giving the same lovely view of the country, the other looking on to the front, the courtyard and garden she had come through last night, and beyond the cypress and beech trees a glimpse of the wide road.

Aprilis perceived she was high up, beyond any possibility of escape that way, had she wished it, and she noticed how silent and deserted the villa seemed—the absence of any one to be seen or heard moving either within or without the house.

A sudden rush of the vague fear she could not quite banish prompted her to try her key in the door.

It was with a painful leap of the heart that she discovered it would by no means fit the lock, and that the door was securely fastened on the outside. The meanness and cunning of the trick vexed her; she pulled the long silk bell-rope angrily.

But when the echoes had long died away, and no one came, fear predominated again, and she walked up and down the room in agitation.

Where the supper had stood last night another repast was laid out in a service of bronze lustred majolica.

There was milk, conserved fruit, butter, the unsalted country bread, and lavish dishes of cherries and peaches.

As Aprilis noticed the food she felt hungry, and remembered that she had not eaten since the supper at her father's house—her betrothal supper, when Astorre had sat beside her.

At this recollection she became melancholy ; a certain affection for her father, for her home, even for the aunt and cousin stirred in her heart ; mistaking her loneliness for homesickness, she began to regret even Astorre, and the tears quivered on her lashes. Trembling a little, she ate the breakfast provided, and through her dismay admired the simple luxury of the service and the twisted vine pattern of the spoons.

When she had finished she wandered up and down the suite of apartments, staring at the pictures and the tapestries, fingering the books that were so beautiful, and to her so dull, and gazing out of the window at the lovely, changeless, and empty landscape. She discovered that all the doors were keyless and boltless, save the bathroom, which fastened from within by means of silver bolts.

She thought of this as a possible means of retreat, and it comforted her ; then, as the hours wore on, and no one came near her, her idleness and her fastidiousness tempted her to use the bathroom and make her toilet ; to adorn her beauty had always been her pleasantest occupation. Securely fastened as the door was she shivered as she disrobed and stepped into the green depths of the bath.

But as the scented, slightly warm water rose softly to her breast and shoulders, she was conscious only of a voluptuous delight.

The dim, rosy, gold light, the lulling sound of the little fountain, the white figure in the shadowed alcove, the roses perfuming the cool air, all combined to give Aprilis the lazy pleasure of a half-waking dream.

She admired the fairness, like drowned pearl, of her own rounded body under the water, and when she stood up the rosiness of her flesh and the drops falling like a crystal veil from her uplifted arms as she bound the yellow hair more securely in place.

At that moment she believed that she would do anything to have her beauty perpetually enshrined in such surroundings, and to be able to always command such luxury.

She was sorry that she had no other gown to don than that of yesterday's festival, but she arranged it carefully, and combed and recombed her hair with the boxwood combs she found, tying it afresh with the white ribbon, and twisting the long, fine curls forward over her shoulders.

The armoury of beauty appliances, the powders and dyes, perfumes and lotions in the glass and porcelain jars and bottles roused her jealousy; she wondered what other woman had used them; thinking this, she frowned, speculating on the ownership of the apartments; then, at the reflection that probably all had been prepared for her, she smiled again. But when her toilet was finished, and she had left the bathroom, her spirits fell.

Why did he not come? What was the object of leaving her so long alone?

Disappointment and a sense of injustice and irked weariness overcame her mind.

She grew tired of the rich rooms, tired of the beautiful landscape, more than a little frightened of the long silence; she longed to see even the officious cringing woman of last night; as the hot hours of midday burnt into the afternoon she became hungry again and more than a little angry at the neglect which left her here.

In her idle wandering to and fro the library, which was a narrow room little more than a corridor, she discovered another door, painted to exactly resemble the panels of the walls, with the same festoons of flowers, and only distinguishable by the keyhole.

Aprilis, in sheer idleness, tried her silver key; to her surprise it fitted and turned easily.

She softly pushed the door back and found herself looking into another room, which was evidently one of the same suite, fitting as it did between the bedroom and the first chamber.

It was furnished in the same style as the others; standing by the window, in a dejected attitude, was a young man in a riding dress.

He turned eagerly at the sound of the opening door.

"Madonna Aprilis!" he exclaimed in soft astonishment.

She knew him, and she flushed with surprise and some shame, yet she was glad too to see a familiar face.

"Messere degli Albizzi, why are you here?" she asked quickly.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE APARTMENTS OF THE CARDINAL

CHRISTOFANO looked at Aprilis with infinite surprise, then with a smile of comprehension that was half amusement, half regret.

"Of all the ladies in Florence I least thought to see you, Madonna, here," he said, looking at her keenly.

Aprilis resolved that she would not betray either her captivity or her ignorance of where she was.

"I am here in an honourable capacity," she answered. "I beg you will say nothing of this meeting in Florence —either to my father or to—Messere Gherardesca."

"I am not like," returned Cristofano, with a deepening of his smile, "to very soon return to Florence."

It occurred to Aprilis that he was a captive like herself; the thought chilled her; the house seemed suddenly ill omened.

"Why are you here?" she asked; "what are you waiting for?"

"Probably you know," he replied, with a certain shrewd carelessness. "Probably the secrets of this house are no secrets to you, Madonna. I am here out of folly, on a vain errand—in the house of my enemy."

Aprilis shuddered.

" What will they do to you ? " she murmured.

He flushed at the sight of the pity in her face.

" I am armed," he said.

She shook her head.

" What avail will that be—if they mean to kill you ? " she said sadly ; then, advancing towards him, she added curiously : " What have you done to—him—that he should want to kill you ? Does he ?—are you sure ? "

" I am very sure," replied Cristofano, and now she noticed that his face was colourless, the mouth strained, the eye wild. " Look ! " He showed her a long, ragged tear on his red robe, near the armpit, where the fine mesh of the mail gleamed beneath. " I slept this morning, and a hand came from behind that tapestry of hawks and doves "—he pointed to a panel of arras near the door—" and struck me here. It would have been a clean stroke, straight to the heart, but for my corslet."

" You should not have slept," shuddered Aprilis.

" I have been enclosed here for many hours, without food or drink, and I was weary beyond endurance," he replied. " And what use would it be for me to try and evade him now ? I have walked into the trap "—he lifted his shoulders—" and it has closed on me."

Aprilis stood silent, fingering the silver key.

" When does the Signore return ? " he asked abruptly.

" I do not know," she murmured ; she supposed he knew who the owner of the house was, but she would not ask ; he believed she was on her own ground, let him continue to think so.

" They told me to-night—at dusk," added Cristofano.

" Who told you ? "

"Two men, servants, I think, who came this morning to see the doors and windows were secure." He glanced sharply at Aprilis. "They could not have known of your key, Madonna."

She could not understand the key herself; it could not possibly have been intended to give her the means of communicating with the prisoner; probably it was a mistake; the wrong key had been given.

"You had better leave me," said Cristofano courteously. "If you are discovered here——"

She interrupted, colouring faintly.

"Oh, I—I am safe enough."

"Naturally, Madonna." He smiled.

She raised her eyes steadily.

"But you? When the dark comes——" She broke off; it was strange and horrible to think of this house, which had breathed love and luxury for her, holding death for him; and why should there be this vendetta against Cristofano degli Albizzi? She had always considered him as a peaceful scholar.

There was some mystery in it all she did not want to unravel.

"Come, tell me, what have you done to him?" she demanded. "Will you swear before San Piero that you have never done him a great wrong such as merits death?"

"I have never done any man a great wrong," replied Cristofano. "I am hated because I am an Albizzi."

There were both sweetness and sincerity in his tones. Aprilis believed him; recalling the handsome face of the wolf-mask she could believe that he could be fierce and brutal in his hates.

" Take my key," she said. " Perhaps it unlocks your door."

He tried eagerly, but without success.

" Of what door is this the key, Madonna ? "

" Of this behind me."

" A secret door ! " he exclaimed ; " perhaps, then, it fits this other."

He lifted the tapestry from behind which he had been struck and revealed a keyhole skilfully concealed in the centre of a gilded rose, one of a wreath that twined between the ribbings of the panels.

Here the key turned at once—the door slipped back, showing a fair-sized passage and a flight of stairs going down into darkness.

" Dare you go that way ? " whispered Aprilis.

Cristofano turned his flushed face towards her ; hope and gratitude had given a new animation to his weariness.

" Have I your permission to go ? " he asked.

" Mine—ah yes !—but can you escape this way—can you leave the house—where does the passage lead to ? "

" There is no one here but the servants," he answered, " and they, I think, are in another part of the building—at least, I will risk it. My sword was stolen while I slept, but I still have my dagger." He put his hand to his hip, where that weapon hung, and smiled gaily. " But for my gratitude," he added, " how shall that be expressed ? It is my life you give me, Madonna Aprilis."

" Pay me this way," she said quickly ; " as I have already asked—speak of this meeting to no one."

" Why should I ? I am no friend of Astorre della Gherardesca, save only in that we both hate the Medici."

" The Gherardesca is no longer master of mine," said

Aprilis. "I have my life in my own hands now, Messere." Brave words that her beating heart belied. Cristofano looked at her with curiosity; she had seemed such a child, such a doll, only a few days ago. He thought of Andrea, and could not forbear a laugh.

"I owe you my life," he repeated; "if you should ever need a service from me, Madonna, it shall not be refused you. I do not speak lightly; a message to San Marco will reach me."

Aprilis smiled.

"San Marco? Ah yes, I have heard that you support the mad Dominican, Fra Girolamo."

Cristofano regarded her with narrowed eyes.

"You should hear him preach one day, Madonna—it would amuse you."

Aprilis stepped nearer and gave him her hand; he kissed the long, white, scented fingers.

"Nay; I meant the key," she said.

He returned it to her.

"I will pray for you," added Aprilis.

His shoulders shook with sudden laughter as he disappeared into the blackness of the passage.

"Farewell, Madonna Aprilis!" his voice floated back to her, and then even the sound of his footsteps was lost.

With a sensation of loneliness Aprilis closed the secret door, locked it and returned to the library, locking that door behind her also.

At least she held her freedom now; whenever she cared to risk it, the way whereby Cristofano had escaped was clear before her; evidently in the silver key she held the pass-key to the secret passages of the villa.

She might escape now when everything was silent—as she might have told her story to Cristofano and accepted his escort to Florence.

But the stranger, in sending her the key and the dagger, had trusted her to wait for him—so at least Aprilis read his action, and she meant to wait for him and her fate.

There was nothing in Florence to tempt her back, nothing to be weighed in the balance against what the man who had kissed her last night had offered her, what she could see for herself was in his power to offer. She was lonely, a little frightened, something terrified at her own boldness ; her head ached, and her spirits were dull with the monotony of her captivity, but she was resolute not to shirk or evade the adventure. The key she fastened securely in the bosom of her dress, but only against an emergency.

He was coming to-night, they had told the Albizzi—" How many more hours ? " she thought wearily. Her idle steps took her back to her bedroom, her idle fingers began playing with the fastenings of one of the great presses at the foot of the bed.

Was it locked, as she had first thought, or did she not understand the fastening ?

The question amused her ; she pulled and twisted the handle this way and that.

Suddenly the door flew open, and Aprilis was looking into a deep recess full of clothes. She took out the first garment eagerly ; her fingers sank pleasantly into folds of heavy silk, but her heart was hot thinking of the other woman to whom these dresses belonged.

With an impatient movement she snatched the gar-

ment from the darkness of the press to the light of the window.

Folds of crimson-pink silk trailed about; half with horror, half with awe, she saw that she held the red robe of a cardinal.

An instant return to the press showed her that it was full of priestly vestments—copes, chasubles, robes, shoes, hats, caps, and boxes of rosaries and chains. Aprilis stood amazed at the revelation that these apartments were the apartments of a priest—a cardinal.

And who was this priest?—the wolf-mask?

With a shudder she dismissed that thought; crossing herself, she declared it was not possible.

She knew very well that it was possible, but to deny even the probability reassured her.

It must be, she told herself, some Roman cardinal on his travels, lodging here—but why had she been given his rooms, and where was he now?

Hastily returning the garments to their place, she closed the press.

It was now beginning to grow dusk, the sun had almost touched the hills, the landscape lay dark, the hills purple beneath the pale golden sky. Aprilis was more and more frightened and lonely and tired; she clung eagerly to the thought of the coming of her mysterious lover.

Now it was so nearly dark surely he must come soon.

She lay down on the bed; she had no means of getting a light, and the dark rooms terrified her; she felt safer on the bed, hidden behind the violet draperies. She had no intention of sleeping; she meant to remain awake,

alive to the least sound; one hand she placed on her bosom, over the key, the other lay under the pillow, grasping the dagger; little more than a toy as it was it gave her a sense of protection. But she had not been five minutes enclosed in the luxurious softness of the bed before she was in a deep slumber.

The eagerly awaited sound of voices aroused her, penetrating even her dreams.

She half sat up, her senses quite clear, and listened. Her room was now in complete darkness, but from the door leading into the library, which she had left open, came a flood of soft light.

A man's voice was reciting or reading a verse of a love poem.

"When your eyes are bent on mine
I straightway do forsake the earth,
Pass from the mortal, become Divine,
And all my being knows new birth."

With a shiver Aprilis recognized the deep voice, the caressing tones of last night's masquer; for whom were these verses meant?—for her?—had he come for her at last?

In a more sentimental tone he began again—

"Not Jove himself——"

A woman's laughter broke the verse and the dreams of Aprilis—a woman's voice, coquettish, light, warm, rose, striking like a whip on the heart of the waiting, listening girl concealed in the Cardinal's bed.

"Enough of verses, Messere, and put these books back—your brother's library is dull."

"It shall be changed, my sweet. What will you have

here ?—not books at all perhaps—a fountain, or an aviary—a chamber for your dwarfs or monkeys ? "

The capricious feminine tones replied languidly :

" I do not think the rooms please me at all ; I was better lodged in Florence."

The man answered eagerly :

" This is but for a moment, my delight ; I will build you a villa—the finest villa in Tuscany."

She laughed, mocking him.

" Where are the ducats ? "

" In the pockets of the Florentines," and he laughed too.

" Ay," and now shrewdness mingled with the languor of her tones, " but you are not so apt as your father in emptying those same pockets."

" Patience, my beautiful, patience ; when I have got rid of that same ugly monk——"

The conversation was interrupted by a third voice.

" Signore—it was in this chamber the prisoner was, and he certainly has escaped."

Heavy exclamations of wrath broke out in the voice of the wolf-mask, his tone of pleading caress changed to one of brutal fury.

" The Madonna is my witness that I am never obeyed ! Who bid ye put him in that chamber ? Were not my directions clear ? May San Piero break the necks of all of you and fling you quick into hell ! "

The servant murmured some trembling excuse, putting the blame on to others ; the woman's voice, full of a lazy indifference, as if she were well used to such displays of wrath, struck in across the flow of violent words.

"Who was this prisoner, Messere?"

"Keep your pretty head clear of politics, Madonna," was the fierce answer. "This was a pestilent conspirator, one of that black brood of San Marco; he should have been meat for dogs by now."

"A conspirator!" The woman laughed lightly. "And you had trapped him here to silence him?"

"It was the secret door he escaped by!" cried the man. "Who has the pass-key, fool!" he shrieked at the servant.

"Bonaventura, Signore."

"And where is she?"

"Signore, she went into Florence this morning with Giacomo——"

The woman's voice interrupted coldly:

"Bonaventura is a jade; when she returns shut her out. Why should she have had the pass-key?"

"Madonna, she always has it—and last night there was the girl——"

"The girl?" The female voice was hard, and Aprilis crouched down on the bed listening, every nerve taut.

"Madonna Santissima!" exclaimed the man. "I had forgotten the girl! Where did Bonaventura put her, fool?"

"Signore, I know not. I speak very little with Bonaventura. One of the men who brought the girl said she was to have a key given her——"

"What damnable confusion is here?" shouted the master. "She was to have had the key of her room here, that she might return to Florence—what reason had I to keep the wench? But God gave you such hard heads!"

"You try my patience very far," said the woman passionately. "Who is this girl, and why is she here? Must you bring her to the same house where you bring me——"

"I am in no mood for your jealousy," was the rough answer. "I brought the girl here to break the pride of Astorre della Gherardesca—a Carnival jest that he will take ill—where is she?"

"Belike in one of the lower rooms——"

A sound of silk skirts, of heavy footfalls, and the speakers moved too far away for Aprilis to hear what they said further.

She dropped back on to the cushion, hiding her hot shamed face in the cool darkness.

So she had been properly fooled—so she had been the victim of a bitter turn played on Astorre by an enemy!

And like a lark before a mirror she had allowed herself to be dazzled into captivity and ruined. For she was ruined now; she would return to Florence a creature despised—in the eyes of a father a thing no longer marketable, in the eyes of Astorre suddenly valueless.

She saw that very clearly, and against the cruelty of her situation her soul rose armed with a certain hard courage hitherto unknown to her; the nature of Aprilis was changing with every second that passed. She lifted herself from the bed, found her pink mantle, and wrapped it round her shoulders.

Her great object now was to escape from the villa; she touched with eager fingers the key lying warm on her bosom.

Hatred lent her a force beyond her strength; she loathed them all—the masquer of last night, the un-

known priest whose room she occupied, and most of all the woman, wife or lover, whose soft voice had stung her dreams to death.

She crept to the door of the library, uncertain as to her next action, half resolved to gain the secret door if she could, and to leave the villa, even in the dark, and to return to Florence, even on foot.

The voices from the outer room, raised, passionate, angry, came to her indistinctly. She stepped into the library; several books were lying on the desk and fresh-cut sheets of paper—he had been writing verses to the other woman, the foolish sentimental verses that had awakened Aprilis.

She shuddered and shielded her eyes from the lamp-light as her hand travelled along the wall to find the secret keyhole, then shrank back as she heard some one suddenly approaching.

She was too late to regain the bedroom; as her feet touched the threshold a young priest entered the cabinet.

"Oh, Santa Lucia!" he exclaimed. "Oh, holy angels!"

Aprilis turned to face him; he wore the vestments of a cardinal, and on his breast was a golden cross; in his handsome, gay, and animal face, round which the luxuriant chestnut hair clustered, almost concealing the tonsure, was strong likeness to the masquer of last night; only this face was a little younger, a little softer, less powerful and brutal; but it was also the countenance of a faun and might easily have become that of a satyr.

Aprilis stood silent, holding the pink mantle over the lower part of her face.

"Oh, Piero!" cried the young Cardinal. "Piero! who is this in my chamber? What Venus in hiding have we here?"

And he burst into a great fit of laughter, which shook him so that he had to lean against the wall.

CHAPTER X

THE LORD OF FLORENCE

THE laughter of the young Cardinal brought the other people into the open doorway behind him; one was the masquer of last night in a very splendid habit of crimson and gold.

Aprilis gave one glance at his face; in this clearer light it showed slightly different from what she had glimpsed in yester eve's moonlight, heavy in line and, despite extreme youth, flushed and dissipated, yet still a handsome face and one of powerful attraction.

Seeing Aprilis, he gave an exclamation of genuine surprise, and frowned at the Cardinal, who was still laughing in a malicious manner.

Aprilis looked at his companion with keen eyes of challenge and hate.

She beheld a woman of such rosy melting fairness that she felt herself brown in comparison—a woman of a perfect but insipid beauty, of a full, opulent figure, blue eyes, fine pale gold hair braided with seed pearls, the nose and lips of a child, and a complexion of flawless pink and white.

Her dress, which was overrich, was of white and silver, cut low and heavily embroidered with gold and pearls;

her long glistening curls fell on to her round fair neck, and above either ear was fastened a white rose.

Instinctively Aprilis knew her type and loathed her; she was not daunted by her beauty, but looked at her with contempt, continuing to shield her own face with the edge of the pink mantle.

The Cardinal was the first to speak.

"Madonna Arcangela," he said, with a courteous insolence, "what do you think of your rival?"

The elder brother (Aprilis was sure now that they were brothers) turned on him violently.

"Will you hold your peace, Giovanni?"

"But the rooms are mine," protested the other, with a smile on his full lips.

The wolf-mask burst into a fury; the veins stood out on his forehead and on his thick neck, the blood rushed into his eyes, he raised his powerful hands above his head and shook them with a gesture of passionate impotency.

Words, fierce and half incoherent, broke from him; he cursed his servants, his messengers, his emissaries in general for the confusion that had attended his two enterprises of last night, the woman Bonaventura in particular for having put Aprilis in these rooms and for having gone to Florence with the pass-key of the secret doors. Madonna Arcangela regarded this wrath with placid indifference; it seemed, however, to soothe her jealousy, for she looked at Aprilis with a tolerance that was almost good nature.

Presently she spoke, without waiting for the man to finish; her flute-like voice cut through his ravings, ignored his presence.

"What is your plight, Madonna, and what do you wish to do?"

"Return to Florence," replied Aprilis. "Think you I have any love for this company?"

Despite the haughtiness of this reply Arcangela seemed pleased.

"You shall return at once. Piero, order the coach for this lady, that she may return to Florence."

So saying she laid her exquisite little hand on his sleeve, and he stopped in his violent denunciation of his servants and looked down at her from his great height.

"And if I do not choose to send her back to Florence?" he asked sullenly.

"You will not dare to keep me," said Aprilis sharply.

He turned his heavy, magnificent eyes towards her now, and a half smile trembled on his lips.

"Not dare? Do you know who I am?"

"Nay," replied the girl. "Who are you, Messere? and who is the noblis Cardinal and this fine lady whose speech is not of Florence?"

He answered impatiently.

"I am Piero dei Medici! Piero dei Medici! And this fair clerk is my brother Giovanni."

Aprilis crouched back against the lintel of the door; her first sensation was one of amazement that she had ever been deceived—who else could have dared, to whom else could that wicked handsome face, so strangely familiar, belong but to the lord of Florence?

"A Medico of the Medici!" she cried scornfully. "I might have known!"

"Well," demanded Piero, "what of it? I have not

hurt you ; you shall go back to Florence and tell Astorre della Gherardesca how you spent a night at Cafaggiuolo —that is, if I do not change my mind and keep you, my pretty piece."

" Hist, Magnifico," said the Cardinal quickly ; " you have gone too far already ; in the name of God, let the maid depart."

Aprilis saw her advantage in the alarm of the young priest and followed it up.

" I am the daughter of Ser Rosario dei Fiorivanti," she said, " and betrothed to the Gherardesca—both free citizens of Florence—you detain me at your peril, Medici."

" Ah, Santa Lucia," exclaimed the Cardinal, " how are we to hold our own when you allow yourself such follies ? This is an honourable lady—what have you done ? How will this story sound before the Signoria ? "

The Magnifico looked half abashed, half defiant ; even to himself his rough jest had lost all savour, and he wished himself free of the confusion attendant on it ; he glanced almost appealingly at his brother, whose superior wit, prudence, and address had saved him from the consequence of many mad recklesnesses.

" I took the maid to anger the Gherardesca, who flouted me—by Heaven, flouted me ! It was a jest of the Carnival—am I never to revenge myself, even in jest, on the followers of that devilish Dominican ? "

The mention of Fra Girolamo reminded him of Cristofano ; he turned quickly to Aprilis.

" Girl—the key they gave you—was it the pass-key to the secret door ? "

" It was," replied Aprilis.

"Then you, belike, know something of the escape of a certain spying emissary of San Marco—the Albizzi?"

Aprilis dropped the mantle from her face.

"And if I do?" she said. "Best say no more of that, Magnifico; it is another story that would sound strangely before the Signoria."

Piero dei Medici broke into a great laugh.

"She threatens me! the little witch threatens me!" he cried. "Giovanni, is it not a thing of spirit? By God, she takes my fancy, this money-lender's daughter with the sharp tongue!"

The Cardinal gripped his arm.

"Better a sharp tongue than a loose one," he said quickly. "If you wish to stay in Florence, Piero, you must grow a little wiser."

He turned to Aprilis with an air of courteous clerical dignity which sat strangely on his jolly, youthful beauty.

"Good Madonna, bear with a foolish jest of the Carnival; you shall be returned with all honour and safety to your father's house—and you may rely on the Medici to make you noble recompense for your day's discomfort."

"Ay, I promised her that," said Piero quickly. "I said I would find her a better husband than the Gherardesca, and, by Heaven, I will—there is Visdomini, who is in the Stinche for striking one of the Signoria. Giovanni, we will pay his fine and release him, so he will wed Madonna Aprilis—and I will give her a villa near Florence, so she can be rid of him when she chooses, for surely he is the most pestilent rascal in the city."

Arcangela interrupted softly:

"You shall find her a husband, Piero," she said,

" and the Visdomini will do very well—but you give her no villas, Magnifico, when you cannot house me better than in the apartments of His Eminence."

Aprilis laughed in the face of all three.

" I need neither your husband nor your villa ! " She turned her lovely face towards the woman. " Do you not think I can make my own fortune, Madonna ? Do you think that I cannot triumph over this foolish jest ? I shall find a lord in Florence as fine as the Gherardesca—better than any pensioner of the Medici ! "

" You are very bold," frowned Piero.

" Because I am not afraid of you," said Aprilis. " We in Florence stand on our own feet and call no man ' Signore.' You may be in the saddle, Magnifico, but you ride without bridle or whip, and when Florence wishes to shake you off you will fall very surely."

" This is stuff you had better have left alone," said Arcangela. " Your Florentine women are too harsh, Piero."

The Cardinal spoke in a dignified and winning tone.

" Madonna, you must not hate the Medici for this idle turn ; we aspire not to be lords but the lovers of Florence—we regard her as a fair charge, embellished and made lovely by our father and bequeathed to us as a cherished heritage."

" Ay, cherish it," said Aprilis, " let your Eminence cherish Florence ! Now let me go, for I am weary of this."

" I also," said Arcangela, putting the fine ringlets of her hair back from her infantile brow. " If you had no better amusement than this to offer "—she gave her lover a cold look—" you might have left me in Florence,"

and she turned back into the outer room, gleaming from head to foot in her sparkling embroideries, which flashed back the lamplight.

"Come, Madonna," said the Cardinal, speaking to Aprilis with a delicate, pleasant respect. "You shall return instantly to your home."

The thought of what her reception was like to be brought a bitter smile to the pale lips of Aprilis.

"The amends of your Eminence come rather late," she said as she followed him.

He daintily took her hand to assist her over the threshold of the next room; he looked at her admiringly with the handsome eyes that were so like the wicked eyes of Piero.

"Believe I am guiltless," he said in his deep masculine voice that was not at all a priestly voice, though he had been a cardinal since he was fifteen. "But let me, in the name of the Medici, demand your sweet and gracious pardon."

She looked at him over her shoulder.

"The Medici and I may come to accounts later," she answered. "I do not lightly give my pardon for a wrong I have not yet realized."

"A rare lady!" said Giovanni dei Medici softly. "Piero I abandon to your wrath, but you may pardon me—who in truth am guiltless."

Aprilis disengaged her hand from his and made no answer.

She went and stood by the window while the Cardinal rang the bell and gave his orders to the servant with authority and decision.

Lamps and candles were lit now in the chamber;

Arcangela reclined on the couch where Aprilis had sat to eat her breakfast that morning.

As she lay back against the soft silk cushions her white shoulders rose out of her gown, and like a fine net the pale gold hairs blew across it ; the pearls in her locks slipped back on the pillows, the white roses were crushed beneath her head, and her face was flushed pearl colour in the shaded lamplight. She was toying with a plate of peaches on the table beside her, watching the chain of gold slip up and down her round arm as she handled the fruit.

But for all her apparent idleness she now and then shot a keen glance at Piero, who stood by the mantelpiece in a sullen attitude, with his eyes cast down.

Presently he left the room, and his brother followed.

Instantly Arcangela sat up.

" How old are you ? " she asked.

" Eighteen."

" I am twenty. I am afraid I shall grow stout ; do you think so ? " Her brows wrinkled anxiously, then she added : " Are you Florentine ? I am from Venice." She set her feet to the ground and leant forward curiously. Do you bleach your hair ? You have more than I have. Is this true about the jest, or is he in love with you ? "

" It was a jest," said Aprilis coldly.

Arcangela sighed.

" You are quite fortunate ; it is not a gay life to be his lover—he is very faithless ; and besides, he has hardly any money. His brother is clever—he will get anything, that Giovanni. I think he will be Pope some day. He is always writing verses to Fiora Visdomini, you know,

the sister of the man they wanted to marry you to. *I* do not think her lovely at all; she would not have been looked at twice in Venice."

The hard hate that was in the heart of Aprilis for this woman melted before this artless chatter; the adorned beauty showed but the ingenuousness of the street girl who had sold flowers in the piazza at Venice until fortune brought her to Florence and lodged her in the palaces of the Medici.

"Do you *love* Piero?" asked Aprilis straightly and gravely.

"Oh no," answered Arcangela, "there is some one I do love, though—he writes me such divine verses! But I am very jealous of the Magnifico," she added instantly; "if you come between us I should hate you."

"I love no one at all," said Aprilis; she added in her heart: "I could easily love Piero."

"It is better," remarked the Venetian wisely, "not to love if one wishes to be happy. But, of course, one cannot help oneself."

"Love or no," said Aprilis firmly, "I mean to live safe and honourable."

"Why do you not marry the Visdomini?" asked Arcangela, "it is a good match——"

The door opened and instantly Arcangela sank back into her indolent, indifferent attitude. It was the Magnifico who entered.

He went up to Aprilis and took her hand with a gentleness that was like his gentleness of last night.

"The coach is ready, Madonna," he said. "First—you have still the pass-key?"

"It is on the table in the bed-chamber," lied Aprilis.

She was not minded to give up the key to the secret chamber at Cafaggiuolo ; she considered it a thing that might have value.

Piero dei Medici led her towards the door.

" Farewell and a pleasant journey," said Arcangela, without moving.

Aprilis bent her head in silence ; nor did she speak to Piero dei Medici as she followed him down the white stairs.

At the door stood the coach ready, the coach that had brought her from Florence.

In those few hours since she had stepped from it Aprilis felt mightily changed—older, harder, and wiser.

There was no one in the wide entrance, which was lit by the rosy tongue of flame in a lamp of wrought copper ; the night air, heavy with the scent of lime, blew in through the open door ; beyond the garden the moon was rising, a bright disc cutting through the blackness of the cypress trees at the gate.

The Medici did not release the hand of Aprilis, but drew her closer towards him.

" What began in jest may end in earnest for me," he said quickly and hoarsely. " I could love you—nay, I do love you, Aprilis."

The word " love " used by him, by his Venetian girl, so freely, rang in the head of Aprilis like a sweet silver bell cracked and ringing false.

" Listen, Medici," she said, " you have made me the butt of a sour jest that has belike ruined me—some day I may let you know whether I forgive or not."

" Stay in Cafaggiuolo and I will make amends," he answered. " I am the lord of Florence."

She looked up steadily into his dark flushed face and laughed; then slipping her hand from his hot palm, turned and entered the coach.

With an angry word the Magnifico turned on his heel and went back up the faintly lit stairs to Arcangela.

From the darkness outside the house the young Cardinal stepped.

"You will not mention about the Albizzi?" he said, with gentle authority; "that, too, was but a boyish Carnival jest of Piero. Silence will bring a reward."

"I shall remember that, your Eminence," replied Aprilis from the darkness of the coach.

"A fair journey, sweet maiden," answered the Cardinal lightly, and closed the door.

The carriage moved away towards Florence, where the second night of the Carnival was filled with light and festival.

CHAPTER XI

SAN MARCO

When the last riot of the eight days of the Carnival of San Giovanni was over and the great heat was beginning to cause a quiet of exhaustion in Florence, Cristofano degli Albizzi went to the convent of San Marco one day towards the evening hour.

The popularity and fame of the Prior of the Dominicans were growing daily; his fearless denunciations of the Pope, the corrupt priesthood and the tyranny of the house of Medici, the frantic sincerity and overwhelming power of his sermons, filled with solemn visions of doom and judgment befalling Italy, gave him an immense influence with the populace, who began to see in him an inspired leader; and the tremendous increase of his following and the manner in which his fame travelled all over the Continent, caused the princes of Italy and even foreign governments to regard him as a political power as much to be reckoned with in Florence as Piero dei Medici. Through the recklessness or heedlessness of his two prime enemies, the Pope and the Magnifico, Fra Girolamo had some time since obtained the separation of the Florentine order from that of Lombardy; he had been elected principal of the new branch, and it was

therefore impossible for him to be moved by either papal or Medicean caprice or spite from the scene which he had chosen as that of his labours ; for in folly, or to vex Venice and Milan, who had forwarded the cause of the Lombards, the two Medici had aforetime used their influence to secure the independence of the monk whom they would now very eagerly have reduced to silence.

That was now beyond their power ; San Marco, as the head of an independent congregation, was above the interference of the lord of Florence ; and he was helpless to contrive the removal of Savonarola elsewhere, for the Prior was only answerable to Rome, and few believed if ordered to quit Florence that he would submit even to Rome.

For Fra Girolamo, of Paduan descent and born and bred in Ferrara, yet believed that his work was appointed him in Florence, and had so identified himself with the city of his adoption that to the Florentines he, too, seemed one of them.

Cristofano was readily admitted into the convent ; in the first cloister, that of the dead, or San Antonino, the monks were drawing water from the well in the centre of the little garden.

The July twilight was beginning to fall, and the square of sky above the cloister, against which the campanile of the adjoining church rose darkly, was flushing with the first deep purple of the hot night. Cristofano noticed the rough robes and bare, neglected feet of the monks, their coarse, hot hands toiling at the ropes, the sweat on their necks and on their bald or shaven heads.

He had a sensation of repulsion towards them and yet

one of envy of Savonarola, who could bring men to cheerfully endure this, and of such material mould a powerful weapon to work his will with.

In the second cloister of San Dominico the Prior was walking with Fra Domenico da Rescia, one of his most devoted monks, and the Conte della Mirandola.

On a stone seat that occupied the centre of the little garden, and that was surrounded by bushes of yellow roses, sat Fra Silvestro, the friar who went into trances and saw visions.

He took no notice of his surroundings, but sang softly to himself, pulling at the petals of the roses.

Cristofano was vexed to find Mirandola with the Prior, as he had wished to see Savonarola privately; but he saluted the young noble with a good grace. He could not, however, forbear saying with a smile:

"You have changed, Conte, since you walked with Ficino and Poliziano in the Platonic Academy at Fiesole, or with Lorenzo in the heathen gardens of the Medici!"

"I wasted much time," replied Mirandola gently. "Those days I spent there seem now to me a web of vanity."

The Prior, who had not spoken when Cristofano kissed his hand, continued to regard the young Conte intently. "You waste more time," he said sternly; "would you hesitate until your head is sinking into the grave?"

Mirandola faintly smiled. He was pallid to ghastliness; his Northern fairness accentuated the hollows and shadows of sickness in his charming face.

"The wise woman said that I should die in the time of lilies," he answered sweetly, "and the lilies are over for this year. So I have till next spring, father."

Cristofano was startled both by the young prince's looks and by his words.

"You do not speak of dying, Signore?" he asked.

"Ah, Messere," replied the Conte, "I have a mortal sickness on me, I do truly think."

"It is more a sickness of the soul than of the body," said the Prior, with that anxious affection, fierce but unmistakable, with which he always regarded the young Lombard. "Thou hast neglected the call of the Lord, Giovanni, which urged thee to join this order, and therefore I doubt if thy soul may be saved alive."

"I cannot leave the world," answered the Conte mournfully. "There is a part of me, father, which clings to beauty and luxury and learning."

Fra Girolamo answered angrily; his harsh features, shadowed in the black hood, flashed with an expression commanding and terrible.

"Truly, I cannot understand these temptations!" he cried. "Hast thou no strength to descry the snares of the devil, when they are put plainly before thee? No courage to put them under foot?"

"*Are* they of the devil?" murmured Mirandola. "Can I not love God and love these things? Can I not gain peace without stripping myself of all I care for?"

"What said our Lord to the young man?" demanded the Prior. "And what did he?" added the monk bitterly—"he turned away: for he had great possessions."

"Father," answered the young Conte earnestly, raising his face, which looked waxen in the increasing twilight, "I will give all my possessions to San Marco

—my books, my pictures, my gems, my manuscripts, and I will join you——"

"Nay," interrupted Savonarola. "What said our founder, San Dominic? 'May my malediction and that of God fall on him that shall bring possessions to this order.' Truly this was disregarded, and the convent owned much; but when I became Prior I sold all, and sent from the convent all gold and silver vessels and all adornments, and thou knowest that there is none of us who own anything save our coarse robe, and that we live on charity and what the lay brethren earn by their labour in the schools."

Mirandola faintly smiled.

"Thou hast no mercy, father," he said. "How shall I come to thee?"

"With nothing—with thy learning forgotten, thy books burnt, thy gems sold for the poor, thy riches dispersed, and in thy heart humility and the love of God only."

"It is too hard," said the Conte; he put up his fine white hand and fingered the linked gold chain on his brocaded bosom.

Fra Domenico, who had hitherto stood silent beside Cristofano, now spoke.

His voice was warm, and seemed to tremble with eagerness.

"If you could but realize for one instant, Messere, the exceeding joy and gladness of serving Christ—the rapture and the passion of being His humble servant, the ecstasy of prayer, of sacrifice!"

But Savonarola added drily:

"Go thy ways, Giovanni, I have said all I can ever say on this matter."

The Conte turned to Cristofano, who had listened in a keen silence.

"You see, Messere, how hard the Prior is," he said, smiling, "on such as are weak and hesitating."

Savonarola flashed his dark eyes, that seemed to have a glint of red in them, from one young man to the other.

"Neither your guidance nor your punishment is in my hands," he remarked sombrely. "I but point the way, as I have pointed it to all Florence."

The young Lombard stooped and kissed his hand.

"I come again to-morrow in the evening when you have leisure," he said, and saluting Cristofano he took his leave.

Fra Girolamo looked after his slight figure until it was lost in the shadows of the cloister of the dead.

"Again he turns away,—again!" he said. "And death already in his face! Ah, what might has the devil put into bits of stone and wood, parchment and quill, that they can turn a sweet soul from the Lord!"

"Father," answered Fra Domenico earnestly, "the Conte will come to you, even if in his dying hour."

Savonarola smiled sarcastically.

"Seeing he cannot caress his trinkets in the tomb!" he added.

He looked at Cristofano.

"And you, Messere, what think you of this hesitation of Pico della Mirandola?"

"I judge only for myself," answered the Albizzi calmly. "Some men must stay in the world, and I am one of them; there I hope, with God's help, to do my part well and honestly. I never thought," and he smiled a little, "to become a monk."

" It is just," replied Savonarola. " As in this convent there are some who are fitted but to draw water and sweep the cells, while others go abroad filling the minds of men with light, so in the world are those who serve God in worldly ways. If you have had no call to spiritual things, but are honest, and truthful in your duty, it shall go well with you."

Cristofano bent his head.

A couple of novices crossed the end of the cloister and Fra Domenico went to join them.

The Prior turned across the grass to where Fra Silvestro sat, Cristofano following him. A beautiful flush was in the air, which was rapidly darkening, and the lights in the convent window glowed like liquid gold.

" You have fine roses for so late, father," remarked Cristofano, and he put his hand in among the thicket of heavy blossoms.

Fra Silvestro lifted his face.

" The angels water them," he said quickly in a hoarse, unpleasant voice.

" The angels ? " smiled Cristofano.

" Fra Silvestro has seen them," said Savonarola, in a tone at once anxious and reverent ; " have you not, brother ? "

The epileptic monk lowered his brows ; his face, misshaped and blotched with disease, hung over on to his shoulder; his hands, coarse, dirty, and swollen, twitched together in his lap with a gesture half impatient, half involuntary.

" Have you not seen the angels ? " repeated the Prior, in a voice that was almost supplicating compared to the hauteur of his usual tones.

" Yes, I have seen the angels," answered Fra Silvestro sullenly.

" But what have *you* seen ? " He looked up with sudden violence. " Foolish and wooden-headed as you are you see nothing ! "

" Patience, brother, patience," replied Savonarola, with a meekness that astonished Cristofano. " I see a little way, though not so far as you."

Fra Silvestro gave his body a punch of contempt and rose.

" Visions ! Ho ! Who has visions ? " he muttered. " I have had visions, terrible visions ! " And he began to perform a kind of frantic dance on the grass.

Fra Girolamo caught him by the arm.

" Kind, sweet brother," he cried, " if thou hast had visions, I beseech thee to tell them to me ! "

Fra Silvestro stared at him as if he had never seen him before, stopped the convulsive movements of the dance, and breaking from the Prior's grasp, shambled away towards the cloister of the dead, howling a nonsensical song at the top of his voice.

Savonarola seated himself on the stone seat ; the roses, pearl coloured in the dusk, brushed against his black and white robe.

" The will of God is revealed to Fra Silvestro," he said ; " he is blessed with visions, and to him is revealed the future."

" Is divine truth poured into such a vessel ? " asked Cristofano. The dark hid his smile.

" Even into such," replied Savonarola ; he turned his face towards Cristofano. " It is some while since I

have seen you, Messere degli Albizzi," he added keenly. "You went to Cafaggiuolo?"

"I went, father, with the desire, as you know, to sound the Medici and to weigh what he had to say. I was but foolish, the thing was a trap. I was kept a prisoner in the villa, and but for one of the Magnifico's damsels, who gave me the key of the secret passage, I should have been murdered—as, indeed, one attempt was made; but I was armed."

"How long will Florence endure this rule?" exclaimed the Prior. "Lorenzo was blasphemer, murderer, and tyrant, but this debauched boy is more horrible in the eyes of Heaven! But it is only for a while; the Medici and all the Princes of Italy will be set down and the wicked will be trampled into the dirt."

The ring of authority and triumph in these words did not please Cristofano; it seemed to him that the Prior was becoming too powerful, and that instead of his being a tool it would be Cristofano degli Albizzi in that position; he wondered what position Savonarola foresaw for himself after this prophesied overthrow of the Medici and all temporal power.

"The Medici must go," he said; "but, father, when they have gone, who will be lord of Florence?"

"Christ," answered the monk instantly.

"And you?" asked Cristofano.

"What shall I be but His servant, as I have been?—leading this poor city to repentance and salvation."

"You would not be a Cardinal, father?"

Savonarola answered in tones of violent contempt:

"Think you that I would take any gifts from the hands of Alessandro Borgia?"

"Would you," asked Cristofano cautiously, "defy Rome?"

"Rome I acknowledge; the Church I bow to," replied the Prior; "but to the Borgia and his brood of monsters I owe and will pay no obedience nor respect. What is he but the horned beast, the foul dragon, the father of filth and abomination from whose mouth issue lies and corruption? There are things known of the Borgia which have blasted my ears to hear—shall he hold the Keys of Heaven and Hell?"

The boldness of these words, spoken as they were in the quiet and dark of the convent cloister, made Cristofano shudder; he was not prepared to so openly defy Christendom.

"The Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli has cast off allegiance to the Pope," he remarked, "and fled to the French—it is murmured he urges them to make a descent on Italy."

"They will come," said Savonarola calmly, "as I have prophesied."

Cristofano did not believe the monk's visions, but rather his own judgments of political events, and this told him that Charles of France was not likely to undertake the tremendous enterprise of a descent into Italy; he had, too, the careless assurance of one of a nation which had long led the world; he could not credit that any of the monk's threatenings of doom would ever really be fulfilled; it was his cue, however, to humour his powerful ally.

"Father," he asked, "when the world is adjusted thus—when tyranny and oppression are swept away, what work is left for us who serve God?"

" We shall go to Constantinople and conquer and convert the infidel," replied Savonarola, with the voice of an enthusiast ; " we shall regain Jerusalem, and bring the whole world under Christian rule."

" The old, old dream," said Cristofano softly.

" My son, it is at hand ! " cried the Prior. " The time is coming !—at last there shall be but one fold and one Shepherd and one King over all the universe, and that King will be Christ."

The darkness now completely enveloped Fra Girolamo. Cristofano could only see the white patch of his robe between the darkness of his cloak, but his voice, threatening and persuasive and absolutely sincere, filled and dominated the silence.

" He is ambitious," thought the young man, " too ambitious, and more to be feared than the Medici."

Aloud he said deferentially but shrewdly :

" Father, you spoke to the Conte della Mirandola of poverty and abnegation, surely that means the sacrifice of more than mere material riches ? Does it not mean the sacrifice of all earthly desires and hopes ? Yet you, father, remain in the world and mingle in mundane matters."

" There was a time," answered the deep voice calmly, " when I longed to leave the world and pass my time in meditation with my poor brethren. I had even chosen the spot for our sanctuary where are those other sanctuaries in the loneliness of the Casentino. It was, however, very clearly revealed to me that we were friars, not hermits, and that as such it was a duty to stay among men and enlighten them. Was I given the gift of prophecy to cry the words of God unto rocks and

trees ? " and the full tones swelled with an exalted pride and passion. " Nay, my place was in the world, in cities, in a great city, even as this Florence."

He paused suddenly and leant forward. Cristofano felt that his eyes were fixed on him through the darkness.

" Are you a follower of mine, Messere degli Albizzi ? " he asked.

" I am called Piagnoni, and I am hated by the Medici," replied Cristofano. " If I could go to Milan I might do something with the Sforza."

" Do not intrigue for me," said Savonarola, " I need it not ; work for the good time coming, for the deliverance the Lord has promised. Trouble not for the Medici, their days in Florence are now few."

He rose as if he wished the interview to end. Cristofano was not satisfied ; he believed the Prior to have secret political dealings from which he was excluded.

As he rose he abruptly voiced these suspicions.

" Is it true, Fra Girolamo, that you receive embassies secretly from the Duke of Milan, the other princes of Italy, and even from the King of France ? "

" Those who come to me I receive," replied the Prior sternly. " I do nothing secretly."

With this brief answer Cristofano was silenced but not satisfied ; the monk's simplicity appeared to him more and more as subtlety.

" You are as powerful as a prince, father," he said. " How will you use this power ? "

" I am what I choose to be, a mendicant friar," answered Savonarola, " and my power is but the power of Christ shining through me."

Cristofano kissed his hand, then, as if he would test the sincerity of the Prior, he said :

" Father, did you see the angels watering the roses ? "

" Nay," replied Fra Girolamo quietly. " But Fra Silvestro saw them."

With this he turned away rather abruptly, and his dark figure became lost in the shadowed masses of the orange, lemon, and oleanders which filled the convent cloister.

Cristofano sighed as he left San Marco ; he was both baffled and unsatisfied.

At the convent door the lay brother in charge gave him a sealed letter.

" A servant boy left it, Messere, and gave no name."

Cristofano was startled ; he could not think who could be addressing him at San Marco.

Under the big lamp at the corner of the Via Larga, where the Medici gardens began, he opened and read the letter, which contained but a few lines :—

" If Messere degli Albizzi remembers a promise he made in Cafaggiuolo, will he attend Madonna Aprilis at the house of Ser Fiorivanti in the morning hours, any day he chooses. The lady begs he will haste."

CHAPTER XII

THE BETROTHAL OF APRILIS

CRISTOFANO had not thought of Aprilis since his return from Cafaggiuolo, his thoughts were becoming more and more occupied with the politics of Florence, and with schemes to reap his own advantage from the struggle, daily increasing, between the adherents of the Medici and the followers of the Prior of San Marco.

Cristofano believed that Ludovico Sforza, the man who was the Duke of Milan in all but name, since his nephew the rightful Duke was his prisoner and dying, had out of spite towards the King of Naples and towards Florence invited Charles of France to invade Italy. He did not think the King would accept so wild a suggestion, but the matter interested him, since he suspected that Savonarola had meddled in these high affairs, and that the monk had joined hands with the tyrant in wishing the arrival of one who would come as an enemy of both Medici and Pope, since the fiery Cardinal of San Piero in Vincoli, who had defied the Borgia with the cannon of Sant' Angelo, was now at the French Court urging Charles to bring God's vengeance against the tyrants of Italy and the corruption of Rome.

The thought of the expulsion of the Medici and the

overthrow of the Borgia was pleasing to Cristofano—the first were his enemies and the second disgusted him with their open wickedness, but he began to fear that the city would but pass from the hands of Piero into those of Savonarola ; his own chances seemed dim ; he began to dislike the monk who had at first moved and fascinated him, and to believe less and less in his visions and prophecies.

" He may well foretell the coming of the conqueror if he is in touch with the Court of Milan—an ambitious monk—probably he would be Pope ! "

And Cristofano thought of his own limited resources and power in Florence ; he had several friends among the Signoria, and a party of young nobles who were enemies of the Medici would be prepared to help him, he knew, but his influence was nothing compared with that of one who had called himself " a bare-footed friar."

The day after he received the letter he went to the pretentious Fiorivanti mansion ; his curiosity was stirred, despite his preoccupation, by the fact of Aprilis being again in her father's house, and by her having written to him ; and his pity was faintly moved by the last sentence of the brief summons : he fancied she was in distress.

With perfect indifference he recalled her beautiful person as she had stood in the door of the room that was his prison, with the key of his release in her hand and the fine golden curls trailing over the blossom-covered gown.

He was admitted at once to Ser Rosario's cabinet. The old money-lender rose to receive him with an air of greater deference than he had ever used before on the few occasions when he had met the young noble.

The room was small and smelt strongly of the parchments and leather of the ledgers and account books which lined the shelves; Ser Rosario had a shop or office in the Via Calamala, but he transacted much of his business here in his new palace.

A worn desk was piled with documents; above it hung an old worn picture of the Virgin, into the frame of which was stuck a withered bunch of the blessed palm of last Lent, tied with a scarlet thread.

Sideways to the desk and facing the door was a narrow window with a lattice looking on to the courtyard, but set so high there was little to be seen save a glimpse of the dark green boughs of the cedar trees without.

The room was dark, close, and sombre, undisturbed by the noises of the household; it seemed as remote from the world as the cell of Fra Girolamo, yet was of the world worldly.

By the window stood Aprilis. She held herself with an air of dignity and resolution; her gown of violet and pink printed silk and her gay tresses were the only brightness in the room.

She did not move when Cristofano entered, and welcomed him only by a faint, half-piteous smile.

Ser Rosario, a dry, hard-faced man of middle age, dressed without pretension, placed a chair for his visitor and stood himself by the desk looking at his daughter, who did not return the glance, but lowered her gaze.

Cristofano had an instant impression that these two people were at his mercy in some way, that they were both intensely supplicating him.

He supposed he was to be entreated not to mention

having seen Aprilis at Cafaggiuolo, and he was both amused and repelled that they should have thought this necessary; it placed them at once in a different world from his. He waited.

Ser Rosario turned on the young man his brown eyes, weakened by much writing.

His gaze was of a piercing keenness, as if he would read what was behind the half-angelic, half-sensuous face, beautiful and indifferent, of the Albizzi. The clear tawny eyes of Cristofano expressed nothing; the smile on his full mouth was merely patient courtesy. He sat at his ease waiting.

"Messere degli Albizzi," said the money-lender, "you are an enemy of the Medici?"

He had the air of a broken man; his shoulders shrank together as he spoke, and his fingers twitched on the back of his chair.

"My name tells you that," replied Cristofano. "We were once as the Medici are, and greater."

The money-lender was silent a moment, then said abruptly:

"I, too, am an enemy of the Medici."

"So are many good citizens of Florence," said Cristofano quietly.

"I have my special reasons to hate and curse the Medici."

"So have many others, Messere."

"Enough, perhaps, to dethrone the Medici if they were united?" asked Ser Rosario sharply.

"Perhaps enough for that." Cristofano glanced at the girl; but she stood immovable, her pure profile dark against the window.

"You, Messere," said Ser Rosario, with that air of half entreaty which contrasted so strangely with his habitual dry manner of authority, "would despise an ally like me—a man who has never troubled about political intrigue, who has no position and no influence?"

Cristofano was on his guard.

"I have no party, Messere, I am in no plot. I live, as you know, under a disability, beyond the city and apart from public affairs. I am an exile here on sufferance."

As he spoke the thought of the magnificent property, the noble palaces once belonging to his family and the poor villa he occupied now, stung him, and the indifference of his expression changed to a look of bitterness.

The money-lender noticed this look, instantly controlled as it was, and urged his point with added eagerness.

"Yes, yes, that is it; you must hate them, by the Virgin,—hate them! Nearly all Florence hates them, Messere. If we must have a master, sooner the Albizzi than the Medici."

Cristofano smiled.

"Ah, Messere, you talk on ambitious themes," and an air of carelessness veiled his intense interest and curiosity.

The money-lender appeared to understand and value this caution.

"You are safe here, Signore," he said. "I am sincere in what I say. In whatever designs you have I may help you. I have one power, money."

Cristofano's eyes darkened; he needed money, needed

it more than anything, and Ser Rosario was known to be rich.

"I have great wealth," continued Ser Rosario, "and I would put a great part of it at the service of any one who wished to head a party against the Medici—any one like yourself, Messere, with prudence, courage, and a name."

The young man perceived that a bargain was being made with him; he wondered what the terms were.

"Messere," he said, leaning forward a little, "I am almost a stranger to you, why should you make these offers to me?"

The money-lender flushed. Again he stole a furtive glance at Aprilis, which she did not return.

"The marriage of my daughter with Astorre della Gherardesca is broken off," he said heavily and with an effort.

Cristofano thought swiftly of Cafaggiuolo.

"That marriage," continued Ser Rosario, "was the crown of my ambition, the fruit of my long labours, the seal of my success. I have nothing but my daughter, and she was to have had all my fortune. Her dowry was to have been twenty thousand crowns."

"And why was the magnificent marriage broken off?" asked Cristofano.

Ser Rosario eyed him straightly.

"Because it got abroad in Florence that my daughter had been twenty-four hours in Cafaggiuolo—in the villa of Piero dei Medici. I went to Astorre della Gherardesca and told him the truth as my daughter had sworn it to me before High Heaven. But he would not believe me."

"And what is the truth?" asked Cristofano softly.

" The truth is that my daughter was stolen from her own house-step the first night of the Carnival of San Giovanni and sent by the Medici to Cafaggiuolo and there kept a prisoner until the next evening, when Piero came with the Cardinal. Messere, they were frightened then and sent her back to Florence, saying it was but a Carnival jest they had put on the Gherardesca. But I had raised the hue and cry for her, and there was no concealing the thing."

" And what did the Conte della Gherardesca say ? " asked Cristofano.

" He said," replied the money-lender bitterly, " that he would marry no woman who had been alone in a house of Piero dei Medici. But, Messere, she only saw him for those few minutes when he returned, and then in the presence of his brother."

Cristofano was reflecting rapidly ; she must have arrived at the villa soon after he was imprisoned there, and her apartments were next to his ; he could be fairly sure that Piero had not been there, fairly sure that there was no one in the house until he left—but afterwards——

" Messere," he said, " you should go to the Medici and demand redress for this ugly jest."

" How can I prove what I say ? " demanded Ser Rosario desperately. " I shall be laughed at, my tale derided ; how can I prove where my daughter was that night ? You, Messere, saw her——"

" She did me a great service."

" Which is why we dared to ask you here, Messere."

Cristofano looked past the man to the silent figure of the woman.

"Madonna," he asked gently, "how came you, a prisoner, by that key?"

Aprilis answered slowly, but like one ready with an answer:

"The woman who received me gave me that key to reassure me, saying that it would open the door of the apartment. I found it would not—I only found the secret door which it fitted when you saw me enter your chamber."

"Did you know where you were, Madonna?"

"I knew nothing. The man who carried me off was masked in the coach. I was alone, I saw no one but two servants as I entered, and a woman who would tell me nothing."

"Madonna, why did you not tell me you were a prisoner? Why did not you also escape?"

She turned her lovely, sad face towards him.

"I suppose I was afraid. I did not wish to return with a stranger to Florence. I meant to stay and face my captors and go boldly—I must have been foolish. That is my only explanation, Messere."

Cristofano smiled; he was convinced that she had been at the villa willingly, whether the story was true in the main or no; for the rest, the affair held mystery, as indeed it did for Ser Rosario, for Aprilis had not told of the incident in the Medici gardens nor many other details, nor had she touched on her own attitude of mind.

Seeing his smile she flushed.

"I am an honourable maiden," she said, "and if any scorn me they do it unjustly. I was in the presence of Piero dei Medici but a few moments, and there were his brother and a woman there."

That Cristofano could believe; on his return to

Florence he had passed the coaches of the Medici and seen the Cardinal and Arcangela, the Venetian darling of the Magnifico.

"Why should I scorn you?" he asked gently. "You saved my life, Monna Aprilis."

Ser Rosario, who had been listening anxiously to this conversation, now spoke:

"You see how my daughter stands, Messere; innocent, she suffers for the cruelty of a villain——"

"What do you wish me to do?" asked Cristofano.

"Messere, my daughter must find a noble husband or enter a convent."

"Ah!" thought Cristofano, "he cannot find any one to marry her"—all was now clear to him; he looked at Aprilis and perceived that she shivered. Ser Rosario saw that he understood and came straight to the object of the whole conversation.

"Messere, if we become allies I will give you the hand of my daughter and all her fortune."

The eagerness of the desperate man clutching at a last chance showed in these words. Cristofano could guess how many bitter consultations of father and daughter had brought them to the pass of the request they were now making him; he could discern the woman's art behind the man's speech; appreciate how she, to save her pride and her name, had thought of appealing to the man who was under an obligation to her, the man whose promise she held. The impression he had had that they were in his hands had been justified; he felt the tension of both father and daughter as they waited for his answer. In the brown eyes of Aprilis he read her need and her despair.

This was her last chance of a noble marriage; if it failed, he did not doubt that her father's pride would place her in the convent he threatened.

Aprilis in a convent!—his own eager love of life made him appreciate what that would be to her; the look in her eyes touched him as if it were the look of a dumb, trapped animal pleading for mercy.

And he needed money.

Yet the thought of what Florence would say, the certain wonder, the possible laughter at his marriage with the Gherardesca's cast-off bride, held him back; besides, the proposition meant an entire readjustment of his life; he had not intended marriage until his ambitions had succeeded; and he believed that the girl had been in Cafaggiuolo willingly.

"Messere," he said slowly, "I am a poor husband for your daughter, my fortunes are so unstable that I had not thought to take a wife. There are others with a greater claim, Messere Andrea Salvucci——"

He smiled, thinking of Andrea, and how his long devotion would carry him over the difficulties at which he, Cristofano, hesitated.

Ser Rosario was about to answer, but Aprilis came forward into the room and putting out her hand stopped him.

"Messere," she said to Cristofano, "I desire to be very sincere with you. My hand was offered to Messere Salvucci and refused."

At this indignation and a certain shame touched Cristofano. He remembered the long love of Andrea, and was disgusted at the worthlessness of this affection. The frankness of Aprilis moved him too; she stood before him abashed, yet with a certain dignity.

The nobility that was in the Albizzi believed that she was untouched save in name by her adventure, and that if he saved her now she would be loyal to their contract.

He stood silent, absorbed in swift thoughts, and she came nearer, holding out her hand.

" Signore," she murmured, " I would be a good wife ; I know housewifery ; I can embroider and make preserves—I am obedient——"

The piteousness of this from the proud and wealthy Aprilis, who had lately been so unapproachable, brought the blood to Cristofano's smooth cheek. He rose swiftly and held out his hand to Ser Rosario, who clutched his strong fingers with a painful eagerness.

" Messere," he said, " I am rejoiced to ask for the hand of Madonna Aprilis."

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER THE BRIDAL FEAST

Aprilis was married in the church of Or San Michele, the church of the great guilds to which her people belonged. Her mother's father had been the head of the guild of the wool-combers, and Ser Rosario's brothers and nephews belonged to the dyers, vintners, and apothecaries. In sight of the chapels and saints dedicated to these industries, Aprilis was married to Cristofano degli Albizzi.

The wedding took place soon after the betrothal in the money-lender's little cabinet: it was Ser Rosario's pride that the ceremony should be splendid, as magnificent as it would have been if the groom had been the Conte della Gherardesca.

Cristofano was not averse, the pomp rather amused him; he regarded it as a challenge flung in the face of Florence and of Piero dei Medici. To any laughter or comment he became really indifferent once resolved on his action; he was not a man people openly mocked, and he felt able to protect both himself and Aprilis, especially now he had the power of Ser Rosario's money behind him. Cristofano grew not ill-pleased with his sudden marriage—the bride was beautiful, the fortune

large, and he felt some contempt for the other men who had lost this chance through their inability to surmount a convention.

Aprilis herself he regarded as something of a mystery, but a mystery that he believed he could unravel presently.

The wedding feast held in the Fiorivanti villa was costly to extravagance; three peacocks, roasted with their feathers on, adorned the table, which during three hours was loaded with a changing succession of rich dishes; musicians played in the gilt gallery, and as many pages as a noble house usually afforded waited on the guests.

Aprilis wore the long gold brocade gown with the tight sleeves faced across with pearls, and the gold net with a pearl edge for her hair that had been prepared for her marriage with the Gherardesca; it did not give her the pleasure she had once thought it would; she sat rather pale and distracted amid the noise and gaiety of her wedding feast.

The escape from what had nearly been her fate, open failure, open shame, and the annihilation of a convent, had left her almost bewildered with relief; the horror of those days when she had realized what the Medici's jest and her own folly would mean were still with her; she shuddered to look back. She was now Madonna Aprilis di Cristofano degli Albizzi, a good name; a fine name, a better name than that of Piero dei Medici: she repeated it to herself again and again to comfort and strengthen herself, repeated it with fervent thankfulness. Now there was no man or woman in Florence could turn aside in disdain from her as one whose fame was breathed upon, as one who had been slighted.

She was the wife of a noble, an honourable married lady, mistress of her own home and life.

The future she tried not to think about. Cristofano she regarded with awe as well as gratitude ; he was not much more of a stranger to her than Astorre della Gherardesca had been ; she could only put up the same prayer now as she had put up when her other marriage had been arranged—that her husband would be good to her. Her dreams of one time, of love and liberty, were for the moment shattered by her misfortunes. She tried not to think of the face of Piero dei Medici ; she sincerely meant to be loyal, even in thought, to Cristofano.

Once or twice during the long feast she looked at him as he sat beside her discoursing amiably with the guests, smiling, witty, urbane, the noble ingratiating himself with the commoner, already popular with all the merchants and craftsmen Ser Rosario had gathered together.

Aprilis marked his curious coloured hair and eyes, the languid almost sleepy expression of his handsome features, the beautiful mouth and chin, the clear, smooth complexion ; it was a face much like her own. She thought of the dark, heavy face of the Medici, rough and coarse in looks and manners compared with Cristofano, yet very splendid in the eyes of Aprilis.

The Arcangela, the gorgeous Venetian, came to her mind ; and Olimpia, the fair Pisan whom the Gherardesca was supposed to love ; she wondered sadly who Cristofano's lady was, for Aprilis did not believe that any man was heart free.

The tears came into her eyes, and she felt lonely and forsaken as she listened to her wedding music and ate her wedding sweets.

None of the old pleasures had any power to move her now; not even the thought of the long chests of clothes and jewels being loaded on to the baggage mules in the courtyard roused her interest.

Cristofano had no place to take his bride to but the villa near Santa Margharita. When the long festival was at length over, Aprilis took leave of her father with a certain tenderness; he had stood beside her more loyally than she had expected—for his own pride and interest perhaps; still he had helped her, and Aprilis was grateful.

It was late afternoon when the little procession left the gates of the Fiorivanti palace. Cristofano owned no coach, and all were on horseback; Aprilis with a white silk mantle over her bridal dress, Cristofano in the purple pink of his festival attire, behind them the two attendants, man and woman.

They rode straight down the Via Larga. At the doors of the great Medici palace another cavalcade was gathering—the Magnifico, returned from hunting at Poggio a Caiano, still wearing his great gloves and boots, and with a white hawk on his wrist.

"What brings him back to Florence in such haste?" said Cristofano quietly.

Aprilis made no answer; she tried not to look at Piero, but the impulse was too strong; she turned her gaze on to his bold face.

He swung round in the saddle to stare at her; she saw his admiration and his anger, and flushed. Cristofano laughed, at which the Medici scowled, and the bridal party passed on to the Piazza del Duomo.

Winding through the dark and narrow streets, dis-

figured by the stalls and sheds of the various shops and trades, they came out on the river, crossed the crowded Ponte Vecchio, with the huddled houses overhanging the water, and following the other bank left the city by the Porta San Niccolò and began to ride up the winding road that led to the open country, with every pace leaving Florence, now veiled in the thin mists of the end of a hot day, farther beneath them.

Aprilis looked at the orchards and kitchen gardens, the groves of olives, the vineyards, the cottages half hidden among the foliage, the hills rising one above the other into the bright spaces of the sky.

This seemed to her a life very different from that enclosed city existence she had known; the sense of being so high up, of looking down on the old cupola of the Duomo and the dark tower of the Signoria to which she had hitherto always looked up, gave her a feeling of exhilaration.

Looking about her curiously she turned in at the modest iron gates, guarded by dark cypresses, of the Villa degli Albizzi and followed Cristofano down the long avenue of olive and fruit trees which ran near the top of the hill on which the grain and vines grew among the figs, walnuts, and pears. At the end of the avenue another iron gate opened on to a wide paved terrace on which the house opened; below the narrow balustrade of this terrace the opulent hillside sloped to the valley, then rose again in hill beyond hill, falling away at last into a farther valley where the Certosa of the Val' Ema showed, looking golden in the warm fading light.

The house of the Albizzi was a large, white, square building with an inner courtyard—little more than a

farm; beyond it were the outhouses and the cottages of the peasants.

The sun struck full on the white front, the green closed shutters, the open door before which hung a straw mat, and the paved terrace, giving an impression of intense heat.

But the wind blew cool across the vast spaces of the valleys, and a great lime tree at the end of the terrace was filled with a rustling breeze which wafted fragrance abroad.

Aprilis dismounted at the door and stood on the stone step while her horse was led away. At the thought that this was to be her home, her spirits sank again.

The place was very remote, almost humble. She felt her gorgeous dress an absurdity, the baggage the mules were toiling up the hill with a mockery; she wondered if her father would not buy her a palazzo in Florence.

Cristofano joined her, and taking her hand led her across the threshold.

A sloping passage, quite dark when the straw mat fell into place behind them, led to the courtyard, in the centre of which was a stone-walled well, and to one side a loggia filled with pots of green plants; the opposite side of the quadrangle was occupied by the chapel, indicated by a cross above the door, the third by stables, and the fourth, that which faced the terrace, by the dwelling-rooms. A low door admitted to these; Cristofano led Aprilis in; a narrow paved corridor, lit by one window giving on the courtyard, led to a flight of stairs turning sharply to the left.

Before these were reached two doors opened into the ground floor apartments.

Cristofano entered the first of these, and Aprilis followed with a strange reluctance.

The room was not large ; ceiling and walls were painted white ; the one window barred ; the floor red brick ; the furniture, table, chairs, and a couch were of black carved wood.

On the sideboard stood a green glass lamp and several articles of majolica in crudely bright colours.

In one corner a black bracket held a little antique bronze of an Amazon.

Aprilis sunk wearily upon the couch, her gorgeous dress strangely at variance with the simplicity of the room.

" You find it a poor place ? " smiled Cristofano.

" Ah, no, Signore," she answered bravely ; " but perhaps we could have a house in Florence presently. I love Florence."

" I am forbidden to live in Florence," he reminded her.

Aprilis had forgotten ; she sat silent, looking pale and forlorn.

" This is my home," added the Albizzi with a gentle dignity. " As such I give it you. Your father will build you a finer villa in time."

" I want nothing finer," faltered Aprilis. She was angry with herself for hating the place—for the fact that her courage was sinking every minute.

" Perhaps," said Cristofano, " the day is not so far distant when the decree against me will be reversed and I shall be able to reside in Florence."

" You do plot against the Medici ? " she asked, plucking nervously at her skirt.

"I am a follower of Fra Girolamo," he evaded. "You have seen or heard him?"

"Neither," said Aprilis. "I have heard he is very terrible. I——" She broke off her sentence with a look of distress.

"You would rather the Medici than the friar ruled in Florence?" smiled Cristofano.

She flushed, and her agitated fingers clutched the brocade of her gown tightly.

Cristofano seated himself on the couch beside her; she had to make an effort not to shrink away. She found herself praying ardently that he would not touch her; the sense of his near presence was overwhelming.

"Aprilis," he said, and she noted the first use of her name, "tell me the truth of that day at Cafaggiuolo?"

She kept her face averted.

"I have told you the truth, Messere."

"I do believe it," he answered with a gentleness for which she was ardently grateful, "but not the whole truth."

Aprilis was silent.

"Now why"—his soft, indifferent voice was very low—"did you pretend to me you were there willingly? Why did you not escape when you were able?"

Still she would not speak.

"Aprilis," he urged, "were you there willingly? If we cannot be lovers, child, we can be friends," and he took her hand in a manner so quiet and kind she felt no desire to withdraw it from his grasp. The frankness and nobility in him—something in his manner—made it easy for her to speak sincerely; he seemed to lift the whole

thing above the sordidness with which her father's terrors and the women's hushed horror had endowed it.

"I *was* there willingly," she said breathlessly. "At first, when he carried me away, I was frightened—but —I did not care for my home or for the Gherardesca, and *he* made me splendid promises, said he would find me a fine husband—and—the Madonna have mercy on me—I was tempted—I *wanted* to wait for him—the house was so beautiful—I thought if he loved me——"

Her voice trailed off and the big burning tears filled her eyes.

"I thought he would marry me," she added simply.

"Would you have been glad to marry him, Aprilis?" asked Cristofano.

"I would have done it—but when I found he was the Medici," she added fiercely, "I scorned him. I flung his offers back at him—I was not afraid then——"

"What offers did he make you, Aprilis?"

"He offered me the Visdomini as a husband if I would stay in Cafaggiuolo."

"Ah!" said Cristofano. "But you—you did not care to stay, Aprilis?"

"No," she said; she put her long hand to her brow and added in a confused way, "I do not know why I tell you all this, Signore."

Cristofano smiled; he liked her the more for her confession, which had in it something of innocent simplicity that showed the truth of her whole tale.

She mistook his silence and thought he was condemning her; the thought of her situation and of how differently she had dreamed her life rushed on her with a sudden force that nearly drove her wild.

She slipped her hand from his grasp and fell on her knees before him.

"Oh, Messere, what have I done? I was afraid, and I did not want to go into the convent—and now I have done you a great wrong—surely you love another lady!"

And she began to sob, kneeling on the red-brick floor in her fine brocade, with the pearl-bound head bent low.

"Nay, no one," said the Albizzi. "My thoughts have been full of other matters than women. There is no lady in my life but you, Aprilis."

But she refused to be comforted.

"But I—I am your wife—and I—I——"

He raised her gently.

"And you do not care for me?" He set her on the couch and softly touched the fair lowered head.

"I do not ask it, dear. Poor Aprilis, poor child!"

And he smiled at her as he would have smiled at a child who weeps for nothing.

"Listen," he added. "I am returning now to Florence. I think I am going to the North for a while. Meanwhile, this is your home, and you will be looked after here. Your father shall come when he will."

She raised her head with a look of shamed relief at this news of his going.

"You will be quite free, Aprilis," said Cristofano gravely. He laid a hand lightly on her shoulder. "You are an Albizzi now; you will remember our honour is in your keeping? You will promise me always to remember that?"

She flushed vividly in response to the appeal.

"By the soul of my mother, I swear, Signore!" she answered fervently.

"I believe you will keep your promise, child." He rose. "To-morrow I will come and say farewell if I go to Lombardy. My people, Vincenzo and his wife, will give you all you want, and your father is near. I will advise you of my return," he said. "Keep a tranquil soul, Aprilis; all troubles will be in time adjusted."

She stooped and swiftly kissed his hand, which brought the colour to his face; he would have liked to have taken her in his arms, but he was as fastidious as he was passionate, exquisite in all things, and he could not force her humility.

But among his ambitious imaginings was now the image of Aprilis coming to him willingly. He left her to change his bridal habit, his blood quickened by the thought of excitement ahead, his mood pleasant.

His proposed journey to the North was not the result of caprice or an excuse to leave his wife. Now he was supported by the money of Ser Rosario he was eager to put in practice a long-conceived project—to visit the Court of Milan and himself sound Ludovico Sforza as to that potentate's intrigues in Florence, and to offer himself as an instrument against the Medici.

So, he thought he could discover for himself how far the Prior of San Marco had mingled with politics, and how far the story of the King of France's proposed descent into Italy was truth or fantasy.

The Albizzi was light-hearted as he rode down to Florence that evening to arrange his journey with his father-in-law. His marriage had combined a chivalrous and gallant action with a stroke of personal aggrandizement, he thought; for once he had been able to combine the teaching of love and beauty of the Neoplatonists with

the stern precepts of San Marco, for he had served both his pleasure and his conscience in taking Aprilis.

The bride's mood was not so cheerful; she sat alone in the strange bare room, and the tears hung on her lashes.

She felt lonely and deserted, and her thoughts would turn to Piero dei Medici, though, in passionate gratitude to Cristofano, who had believed her and taken her word, she endeavoured desperately to put him from her mind. Aprilis did not know that her husband was not relying solely on that same promise; the steward Vincenzo and his wife, faithful followers of the Albizzi for two generations, had been set to guard and watch her every movement.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EMERALD UNICORN

When Cristofano left Florence for Milan he met Andrea at the Prato gate.

The young man was buying books at a little shop inside the walls ; when Cristofano saw him he was bargaining over a Greek manuscript bound in covers of pierced brass.

The Albizzi knew that his friendship with Andrea was over, but in half-malicious amusement he stopped his horse and hailed the scholar.

Andrea started and came forward with an attempt at his usual manner.

" You are leaving Florence ? " he asked.

" For a few weeks."

" On business for San Marco ? "

" On business of my own," smiled Cristofano. His marriage, that was uppermost in the minds of both, neither would speak of ; they looked at each other steadily and with dislike.

" Are you become a disciple of the friar ? " added Cristofano lightly.

" Sooner than a follower of the Medici, yes," replied Andrea.

" Ah, he becomes powerful, the friar," remarked the Albizzi, and, carelessly saluting the other, rode through the squat tower of the gate.

Andrea looked after him angrily ; his old-time friendship for the young noble had turned to a feeling that was near hatred and contempt—hatred because he possessed Aprilis, contempt because he had taken her for his wife.

" And he leaves her," he thought, " the day after his marriage."

He was disappointed in Cristofano, whom he had thought of real loftiness ; he remembered the conversation they had had together on the hills above Florence, and how the Albizzi had appeared to be sincerely seeking the truth among the confusions of the time—and now he had taken, for the sake of her fortune, the woman of whom he had spoken as a puppet.

There could be no other reason : Ser Rosario had bought a husband for his daughter with the fruits of his years of hard usury ; this in itself Andrea did not find surprising, but he was both amazed and disgusted that Cristofano should have been the party to such a bargain.

Yet, in a secretive way, he half envied, half admired the daring and courage that had boldly seized such a chance—a fortune and—Aprilis.

The smiling look in the clear brown eyes of Cristofano had stung him : he could not check an uneasy wonder as to whether he had been a fool to refuse what Cristofano had taken—as to whether it was not cowardice as much as principle that had made him turn aside Ser Rosario's offer.

" I had more excuse than he," thought Andrea, " for

I loved her ; " he might have added that he loved her still, for the thought of her tormented him as the thought of one to whom he was indifferent could never have done.

Yet he had believed himself for ever disillusioned, for ever repelled against Aprilis.

Aprilis enshrined, Aprilis immaculate, Aprilis admired and envied, Aprilis untouched as a cluster of hyacinth buds with the sparkling bloom unfingered—he had desired and loved her despite his reasoning and his philosophy ; but Aprilis talked of, laughed at, rejected, Aprilis the heroine of a Carnival adventure with Piero dei Medici, Aprilis supplicating and eagerly searching for a husband to save her from the oblivion of a convent—her, Andrea had not desired nor loved ; so at least he had thought when he had rejected her father's advances with a feeling of relief that he was now free of her for ever, that he had fathomed her shallow loveliness, that she would no more interfere with his dreams, that she was, for him, now charmless and impotent.

But when he had heard of her betrothal to Cristofano, when he had glimpsed her marriage in Arsanmichele, her value and her charm returned for him ; now she was utterly lost he began to regard as mere coward foolishness the refusal he had considered so wise and fine.

Consequently he disliked Cristofano ; seeing him now calm, satisfied, smiling, the husband of Aprilis, he began to hate him and to feel he had done him a great wrong in taking the woman he had refused. Preoccupied and sad, he completed the purchase of the Greek book and turned back along the Lung' Arno. The river rolled a lazy gold beneath the early morning sun, on the opposite bank the fertile hills rose fair above the walls, and on the height

the tower and the black and white marble front of San Miniato showed like a sentinel above the city.

Andrea turned aside from the river and took the narrow, dark streets to the Via Larga ; the height of the palaces and the closeness with which they were set together made these streets close and stifling as the bottom of a well ; where the sun struck it fell in a strong shaft of light with the force of a sword of fire.

Andrea, making his way through the crowds about the shops and markets, the sordid sights and stale odours, the labour, dust, and slackness of summer in the city, thought of Aprilis in the villa among the hills, thought of the terrace with the lime tree where he had often sat looking across the lovely view to the Certosa in the Val d'Ema, and where she was probably sitting now with the sweet shade over her and the cool breeze lifting her long fine strands of golden hair. And thus he reached his master's house.

He found the Conte lying on a couch by the open window in the little cabinet that looked on the courtyard ; the great heat of Florence was telling on his malady, his physician had advised him to go to one of the hill retreats, Vallombrosa or Camaldoli, where in the old days he had disputed philosophy with Lorenzo Poliziano and Ficino.

But Mirandola would not leave the city ; he could not bring himself to miss the evenings in the convent garden of San Marco nor the occasional visits of Fra Girolamo.

The young nobleman, who had been one of the most admired, praised, and flattered men of his time, now felt that there was no one loved him as did this friar who put upon him injunctions beyond his strength to obey.

He lay now at full length, his head pillowed high to catch the fresh air from the window, his dark violet robe drawn smoothly down to the points of his gold lattice shoes, his blond hair evenly falling either side his face, whose beauty was being lost in a settled look of ghastly sickness.

By his side, leaning against the mullions of the window, was a figure Andrea was surprised to see, the splendid figure of a man in scarlet and tawny silks whose attire was hung at all points with knots and tassels of gold.

In the handsome face, the dark red locks, the powerful neck and mighty figure Andrea recognized Piero dei Medici.

He was at once withdrawing, more from distaste than courtesy, but Mirandola called him to the couch and took from him the Greek volume.

" Messere Salvucci has been a long journey for me to buy a volume I heard of at the Prato gate," he said, eagerly turning over the thick vellum leaves.

" Why do you not make these shopkeepers come to you ? " asked the Magnifico.

Giovanni Pico smiled sadly.

" I am trying to cease these habits of pride. I would have gone myself had I had the strength ; " and he put aside the book on the table near as if he had no longer any pleasure in the purchase.

" You had best take the habit, Conte," returned Piero abruptly.

Mirandola looked at him in silence. The Magnifico was but twenty-four, yet looked more than his age by reason of his size and his magnificence ; handsome, reckless, rude, fond of athletics and indifferent to the

arts, extravagant and careless or ignorant of all politics and statecraft, he was an exception to a family ugly, prudent, courteous, astute, cultivated, and born to govern.

He had nothing in common with his famous father save his animal passions, his love of show, and the instincts of the tyrant; the finer qualities of Lorenzo had descended to Giovanni, the young Cardinal.

Mirandola had little in common with Piero, but long association with the house of Medici and the memory of his tender friendship with Lorenzo gave him a friendship for Lorenzo's son.

He could not remain indifferent to that house which had borne so splendid a part in the great revival of learning wherein he had shone so brilliantly, to the house that had so enthusiastically encouraged the beauty and the knowledge to which his own brief and gorgeous years had been devoted.

"If you join San Marco," added Piero, "I hope you will learn to silence the noisy Prior."

Mirandola raised himself on his elbow and gently changed the subject; he felt it hopeless to talk of Savonarola to Piero dei Medici.

"Magnifico," he said, "have you seen the winged head of victory Messere Salvucci bought for me?—it was found in a vineyard at Pratolino."

Piero merely glanced at the corner where the beautiful mask stood in the shade; he was in no wise turned from his point.

"Giovanni," he said, "this monk must be silenced, and soon."

Mirandola smiled.

" Who is to silence him, Magnifico ? " he asked gently.

" If no one else can bridle that troublesome tongue—the Pope."

" How ? " asked Mirandola, still smiling.

" There are two ways," answered the Medici : " the first, a Cardinal's hat—I fancy sight of the scarlet will blind his eyes to the sins of the Borgia," he added, with a rough laugh.

" Fra Girolamo would not take a Cardinal's hat," said the Conte.

" Then," replied Piero harshly, " there is excommunication."

" The Prior has done nothing to deserve that ! " exclaimed the Conte, startled.

The dark face of the Magnifico flushed and his reddish eyes lowered.

" Nothing ! " he repeated. " Nothing ! He sets all Florence against me—he is raising a revolt against us with his visions and his prophecies—the man is mad or a hypocrite and a blasphemer—he defies the Pope himself, ay—openly in the Duomo ! Is this to be permitted—are the Medici to be flouted in Florence ? "

" Signore," replied Mirandola gently, " your noble father tried to silence Fra Girolamo, using all his arts and courtesies, and in vain——"

" I shall use neither arts nor courtesies," replied Piero. " He must be silenced or go. Shall I endure to be taunted, defied, mocked by a barefoot monk whose very convent was the gift of a Medici ? I tell you, Conte," he added violently, " that crazy Dominican poisons the air of Florence for me. And he grows too great, by God, he grows too great ! He has more flocking to

join his brethren than the convent will contain—and you—even you, Conte, long for the black and white robe ! "

" Savonarola is great indeed," said Mirandola, " too great to be meddled with, Magnifico—to interfere with him would bring brave Florence about your ears. And you have no excuse. The Prior is answerable only to Rome."

" To Rome he shall answer," flashed Piero, " to Rome and Alessandro ! "

The Conte shuddered.

" What has His Holiness against the friar ? " he asked in a troubled way.

If the Borgia stretched forth his hand against the Dominican, Mirandola saw little hope.

" You know," replied Piero, " he denies the Pope ; arraigns him from the pulpit—at present Alessandro is indifferent, but I can rouse him—I have some power in Rome, Giovanni."

The Conte knew that this was true ; Piero's wife was a princess of the Orsini, one of the most influential families in the papal city—through them the Medici would easily get the private ear of the Pope or his creatures.

" I warn you, Conte," continued the Medici, " the monk must go, one way or another. And I ask you, as a friend of our house, to leave his company."

The Conte was silent ; it was quite useless to argue with Piero or to endeavour to justify Savonarola to him ; Fra Girolamo had been too fearlessly outspoken to be forgiven either by Pope or Medici.

That Mirandola well knew, and his whole soul sad-

dened as he thought of what Savonarola had to contend with in his endeavour to reform the Church and raise up Florence from the slough of tyranny and corruption.

Piero, satisfied that he had warned and silenced the Conte, spoke no more of the matter, but with an impetuous wave of the hand, as if he dismissed a hateful subject, came closer to the couch.

" See, Giovanni, what I have brought you," he said, his voice changing to a charming tone of softness, almost caress. " Knowing that you were sick and loved these things, I thought this might hearten you—and turn you from San Marco," he added, with a touch of malice.

He took from the pocket hanging above his short sword a carelessly made packet of white silk which he held out in his large, shapely brown hand.

The Conte sat up and unwrapped the scrap of silk ; when he saw what it contained he flushed from his throat to his brow.

" The Emerald Unicorn, Magnifico ! "

And he gazed incredulously at the jewel glowing on his thin white palm.

It was a square table emerald, the size of a finger-joint, the colour of a summer sea with the sun shining through it in Southern latitudes.

The light flickered in and out of it, changing it to blue-green and gold-green, and causing it to burn with an intensity of colour that was like the palpable presence of a spirit.

Round the edges was cut with exquisite fineness a border of grape clusters, and in the centre was the design of a unicorn sitting on his haunches and wreathed with roses about the neck.

Mirandola knew it for one of the most precious gems in the Medici collection.

"As if I could accept this, Magnifico!" he smiled. "It is worth many thousands of crowns."

"Take it," said Piero, "or it will go to Madonna Arcangela, who is always begging it; her jeweller has told her it would cut into a fine pair of earrings."

"Nay, Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the Conte anxiously; "but, Signore, I cannot take it—give it to Cardinal Giovanni."

"I have quarrelled with him," replied the Magnifico carelessly, "on the matter of the Visdomini—he wishes me to free his favourite from the Stinche, but I would sooner Messere Carlo was in than out. I will not give the emerald to Giovanni—if you will not have it, it goes back into the cabinet whence it came."

"But not into the hands of Madonna Arcangela?" said the Conte earnestly. "Signore, your father loved this gem."

"Keep it, then, for his sake, Giovanni Pico."

Mirandola shook his blond head.

"I am too near the grave to think of jewels," he replied. "Mine own I try to part with. Yesterday I gave away a Hercules in jasper and a dolphin in chalcedony."

Piero took the emerald and returned it to his pocket.

"This is the monk's doing!" he exclaimed angrily.

"Perhaps it is God's doing," returned Mirandola sadly.

The Magnifico shrugged his shoulders.

"God!" he repeated; an expression half of non-comprehension, half of amusement, rested on his dark features.

Mirandola fell back on his cushions.

" Do not give the gem to the Venetian," he said.

" Arcangela is a jade," answered the Medici, " she shall have nothing more." Then he added abruptly, " Do you know anything of the new wife of the Albizzi ? "

Giovanni Pico shook his head, surprised at the question ; little or no gossip of outside events reached him. Andrea, who till now had been silent, copying at the desk, laid down his pen and listened.

" Cristofano degli Albizzi went to Milan to-day," continued Piero ; " he leaves his wife alone in a little country farm—he is not a fool, Cristofano ; I would like to know the meaning of this action of his."

" He trusts his wife," answered Mirandola simply.

Piero laughed ; he did not believe in trusting any woman.

" I did not know the Albizzi was married," added the Conte ; " who is the bride ? "

" A money-lender's daughter. I approve her. She is Aprilis ; is it not a pretty name ? "

" Let her be, Magnifico," said Mirandola wearily ; " your loves make you too many hates in Florence."

Piero soon after took his leave. The Conte could talk of nothing save the magnificent gem the reckless generosity of the Medici had offered him ; but Andrea hardly listened to what he said ; he was thinking bitterly, jealously, of Aprilis lonely in the villa above Florence —Aprilis, married to Cristofano, and whom Piero dei Medici approved.

CHAPTER XV

FIORA

THE long hot days passed strangely for Aprilis in the Villa degli Albizzi ; the woman she had brought from her father's house soon left her, tired of the dull life, nor indeed was there much for her to do ; what need now for Aprilis to gild her hair, make washes for her complexion and spend hours in the choosing of her gowns ? There was no one to see her now but her husband's servants ; few of her friends came up the hill to the little farm. Florence was empty, the wealthy being away in summer retreats ; occasionally she went down to the city to her father's palace, accompanied always by the steward Vincenzo, but that was but exchanging one dullness for another.

Once when riding through the Via Larga, she had met Piero dei Medici returning from Poggio a Caiano for some business forced upon his idleness.

Alfonsina D'Orsini, his proud-faced wife, was beside him, and he was followed by his cousins Guiliano and Lorenzo.

He glanced at Aprilis without saluting, but afterwards, when she was leaving the Palazzo Fiorivanti, a black

Venetian page slipped into her hand a letter, whispering that it was from the Magnifico.

Vincenzo had not noticed the incident, but when Aprilis mounted she dropped the letter in the dust and let her horse trample on it ; and when she met Piero again, galloping to the Palazzo of the Signoria, she looked before her and not at all at the Medici.

Long and weary were the days and sad her spirits ; the old life seemed better, the gossip, the flattery, the daily round of small interests, for then there had always been hope and expectancy in the air, and now there seemed neither.

She was married, her life was settled, even her father troubled no more about her ; she had ceased to be of interest to any one ; there was no more speculation for Aprilis, her fate was accomplished.

Yet she, bound by this marriage that was not a marriage, enchained by gratitude to a stranger, could not wholly forgo her dreams.

As the weeks went by, the image of Cristofano grew dim in her mind, her thoughts flew wide ; she wondered if she would ever be happy, if the beauty she had been taught to prize so much would really prove to be utterly useless.

The house which was practically her prison she came to know with a familiarity half tinged with hate. The square courtyard with the well in the centre, on one side the red-tiled roofed loggia filled with terra-cotta vases of oleanders and lemons and pots of basil and other sweet herbs, the whitewashed wall of the chapel opposite, with the iron cross above the low door, the stables with a vine shading the blankness of the wall, occupying one

of the longer sides, the house with the square green-shuttered windows the other.

Then the terrace with the low balustrade on which stood long boxes of lilies, and beneath which grew a border of single roses, pale yellow and pale pink.

The slopes below the terrace, the fruit trees, the vines, the olives growing amid the red gold patches of the oats, corn, and barley, and the view beyond, hill after hill and valley opening on to valley, the black cypresses rising from amidst the grey foliage of the olives, the belfries of churches showing on distant heights ; it was strange how soon this view, almost boundless as it seemed, came to be like a prison wall to Aprilis.

She loved the lime tree that grew at the far end of the terrace ; beneath the heavy foliage which swept almost to the ground was a stone bench circling the trunk, and to sit there was like sitting within sound of the sea, so full were the branches of bees gathering the honey from the acutely perfumed blossoms.

Aprilis would sit there, with one of the ancient tales of Charlemagne and Orlando on her knees, and look up into the heights of the branches, the leaves green gold, the clusters of flowers amber gold, the bees brown gold, all radiant with the warmth and light of the sun, and there, listening to the soothing murmurs of the bees, she would try and feign that she was happy.

The interior of the house was all free to her ; she soon knew and was tired of all the rooms : the chapel with the white walls and red floor, the faded fresco of San Antonio and Santa Barbara adoring the Virgin over the marble altar, the little holy paintings on the walls with black crosses above them, the wooden seats with

the leathern cushions, the tiny antechamber for the priest where the church furniture was kept and where two Madonnas, one dark and one fair, dressed in real silk and pearls, were kept locked in a dark press smelling of lavender, this had no charm for Aprilis.

Then there were the dark stables, adjoining, where the white oxen, the mules, and the horses came at night, and, opposite these, the house itself.

On the ground floor was the room Aprilis had first entered, opening from that another, almost the same but with a table for dining, and beyond these, the kitchen with the huge open fire-place where Vincenzo's wife ruled.

Up the single flight of rough stone stairs at the end of the passage were the apartments of Aprilis. On one side, to the right, was a door leading into a large room pleasantly hung with tapestries ; here Aprilis kept her chests, her embroidery frames, her spinning wheels ; here she had set up the little shrine to her own guardian saint, Santa Lucia, for her own full name of baptism was Aprilis Lucia. But she did not care for this room ; it was dark by reason of the small window, the red floor was old and worn, the painted ceiling stained and faded with winter rains.

Two smaller rooms opened from this : the one looking on the front her bedchamber—this too was dark and contained little beyond the heavy bed and presses ; the walls were painted with flowers and birds, dark and faded ; either side the dull blue cloth curtains of the bed hung a black crucifix and a vessel for holy water.

The other room was a bedroom also, and never used by Aprilis ; she believed all the rooms had been the

apartments of Cristofano and his squire, hastily arranged for her use.

On the other side of the stairs a corridor with two windows ran the length of the house. This was lined with locked cases and cabinets of books, coins, and manuscripts. This corridor admitted to the rooms that gave on the courtyard, the first one Cristofano's library or study, the only room in the house where he had left his personal impress.

The furniture was rich, the arras costly, several beautiful pictures and antique statues and vases adorned the walls, valuable books filled the shelves above the handsome desk.

The second room had been used as an armoury and was now the bedroom of Vincenzo's daughter, Caterina, who was appointed the personal attendant of Aprilis.

The corridor ended in a narrow strip of bricked room running across the end of the house, with a window and a little balcony ; this was used for storing figs, apples, pears, grain, and herbs for the winter. Such was the domain of Aprilis, and as she came to know it well more and more it seemed like a prison.

Day after day passed the same. The fruit trees were stripped, baskets of peaches, apricots, plums, and pears were daily carried into the house ; the grain was cut and piled up in stacks in the sun ; the white oxen began to plough the dry, cracking yellow land ; the grapes swelled on the vine, the hard green softening into red ; under the dry leaves of the olives the clusters of fruit began to show ; the blossoms fell from the lime tree, and the bees left the branches ; the roses died, and no flowers took their place ; all day long the grasshoppers

sang, filling the air with sharp, incessant monotony of sound; the swallows departed, all save two who had built a nest under the eaves; and so the summer waxed and waned, and September came with undiminished heat and found Aprilis still lonely at the farm. Then, one day at last came an incident to break the monotony.

Aprilis was on the terrace, seated on the stone coping still hot, though the sun had left it some while and the shadow was already far down the hill slope.

It was late afternoon, and she was watching the belfry of the church on the opposite height, where she would soon see the bronze bells swing out from their scarlet wooden frames in the solemn peals of the Ave Maria.

A footstep on the stone terrace caused her to turn with a start; she was surprised any one should be here now, as all the peasants were still abroad working in the hollow of the valley.

A lady came round the lime tree and paused in front of Aprilis.

"Are you Madonna degli Albizzi?" she asked, with a timid sweetness.

Aprilis acknowledged her new, still strange name, and rose.

"I am Fiora dei Visdomini," replied the other. "My brother and I are good friends of Messere Cristofano."

Aprilis could not deny this, she knew nothing of her husband's friends; but the name brought up sharp memories of the night in Cafaggiuolo—it was Carlo dei Visdomini who had been offered her by the Medici; with instant alertness she perceived the strangeness of the favourites of the Medici being friends of the Albizzi.

Fiora seated herself on the wall and removed the light mask she wore as a protection against the sun.

"I found your gate open," she said. "You forgive me for coming in? I meant to come before, Madonna, but I have been at Camaldoli during the great heat."

Aprilis smiled.

"Why do you come now, Madonna?" she asked, and seated herself beside her visitor.

Fiora laughed and took her hand in a caressing way.

"Are you not lonely here?" she asked in a confidential way. "Jesu Maria! but it is a life of penitence," and she glanced round the sleepy farm.

Aprilis studied her closely; she remembered now that her husband had mentioned Fiora dei Visdomini as the lady to whom Giovanni dei Medici was always writing verses.

Fiora was beautiful in a languid, sentimental fashion; her crimped hair was pale red, her complexion very white, her eyes dark brown; she wore a wonderful gown and mantle of pale green stamped with dark green leaves and with the bust and sleeves embroidered with pearls; Aprilis, seeing this gown, thought of her own upstairs which she never had the heart to wear.

Fiora was very exquisite, very gentle, and seemed at the same time very gay and pleased with life; Aprilis wondered if her brother was still in the Stinche or if Piero had paid his fine.

"Cannot we be friends?" asked Madonna dei Visdomini. "Will you not come to our villa and read poetry with me? In the evening we have music——"

Aprilis interrupted.

"Where is your villa?"

" At Fiesole, Madonna, on the hill above the Badia."

" Do you think I could go so far ? " smiled Aprilis. " I only go between here and my father's house."

" You are watched ! " cried Fiora ; " is such monstrous barbarism possible ? " She clasped her hands.

Aprilis did not answer ; she was sure that this lady was an emissary of the Magnifico, and that the Medici would be among the guests at the feasts in the Villa Visdomini.

She felt excited, pleased ; she wanted the friendship of this girl of her own age, she liked the life Fiora might bring her into—but she must refuse it all.

She rose, a slim figure in the long straight blue gown.

" Madonna, I can go nowhere, for many reasons, but if you care to come here sometimes I shall be glad. It is lonely—and always the same."

" Alas ! " lamented Fiora, " and there is so much in the world waiting for fair youth and you must waste yours here ! Do you not care for dancing and singing and poetry and feasts, and the chase—and love—ah, love ? "

Aprilis could not answer ; the soft words of the stranger made her passionately realize how much she wanted all these things, how starved her soul and her senses were, how much her calm had been apathy and not real peace.

She looked with hatred at the white front of the house ; the sharp church bell rang out like a note of warning, and the tears came to the eyes of Aprilis ; more than ever she felt like a prisoner.

" Ah, Madonna ! " sighed Fiora, " I think you do not know how beautiful the world can be ! "

Aprilis could guess.

"You do not come as a friend of the Albizzi here," she said, with her slow smile.

"Perhaps as a friend of one greater than the Albizzi and one who values you more highly," replied Fiora.

"Piero dei Medici!" said Aprilis softly. "Piero dei Medici!"

"The lord of Florence," murmured Fiora; she fanned herself lazily with her mask, the fine threads of red hair blew from under the scarlet silk head-net across her brow.

"Nay, we are free in Florence." The daughter of a citizen, neither noble nor courtier, spoke in Aprilis. "The Medici is no lord of mine."

"You may be his lady, he adores you," said Fiora; "he pines and languishes for a sight of you, Madonna."

"Why did he send you to me?" asked Aprilis straightly.

"He did not send me; I came out of pure pity for his distress, and because I had a great curiosity to see the lady who could so disturb Piero dei Medici's repose."

Aprilis discerned the affected extravagance of the words, but she could not know their falsity; Fiora was on this errand as the result of an arrangement between Giovanni and Piero by which the Magnifico redeemed Carlo dei Visdomini from the Stinche on condition that the gentle and able Fiora lured back into the circle of the Medici the money-lender's daughter whom Piero had abducted for a jest, and now desired because of her scorn of him and because she was the wife of his enemy; as he always desired fruit out of reach.

"Are you cruel and heartless and cold?" asked Madonna Visdomini reproachfully.

" I have no message to Piero dei Medici," said Aprilis quietly.

Fiora sighed and rose.

With a loving gesture she put her arm round the girl's shoulder.

" Will you not come to Fiesole some day ? " she asked softly.

Aprilis could not altogether repel her any more than a prisoner can wholly deafen himself to the voice that promises him release.

" Perhaps I may," she answered ; " at least come here, Madonna, if it is not too far and too dull."

As they stood so, by the lime tree, a pretty pair with arms intertwined, Vincenzo, Cristofano's watch-dog, never long absent from his charge, came from the house.

Aprilis knew now that he was there as her guardian. The knowledge lessened her sense of obligation to Cristofano.

" Vincenzo," she said, " this lady is an ancient friend of mine."

The steward, who had been lulled into security by the perfect innocency of the life Aprilis led, bowed and turned away carelessly.

Fiora kissed Aprilis warmly.

" Come earlier another time," said the hostess, " and we will have a repast on the terrace."

" Shall I come alone ? " asked Fiora as they walked down the long avenue to the gate.

" It were best—you see I am well guarded. Usually it is not so easy to gain admission as you found it to-day, Madonna."

Waiting beyond the wall in the narrow shadowed road

was Fiora's litter, in which a parrot and a monkey quarrelled, and a number of attendants in the livery of her house.

As it was lowered for her to enter, she embraced Aprilis and put a packet in her hand.

" A recipe for happiness," she said, smiling.

Aprilis watched the lovely creature borne away between the stone walls and the overhanging olive trees, then slowly returned to the house, so silent, so monotonous, so lonely.

She went to the chapel, and taking the fair-haired and most gorgeously dressed Madonna from the press, set her on the chest that held the priest's vestments in the ante-chamber and prayed to her to give her strength not to open the letter Fiora had given her at parting.

When she rose from her knees she felt calmer, yet she did not destroy the package but put it carefully away in a little leathern casket in her bedchamber, where she kept the silver key of the secret passages at Cafaggiuolo.

CHAPTER XVI

A DAUGHTER OF FLORENCE

SEPTEMBER came nearly to an end, and Aprilis had not read the letter she had put away with the silver key.

But day and night she thought of Piero dei Medici, day and night she dwelt on her meeting with Fiora, the lady to whom the Cardinal wrote verses, and the life she could glimpse from the words of Fiora called her like the call of music played on flutes of sardonyx and viols of silver.

She pictured the Visdomini villa at Fiesole in the purple cool of the evening, the ladies reclining on the marble benches before the thickets of roses and laurels, the cavaliers at their feet on the soft grass, a poet reading to them or a philosopher discoursing the laws and wisdom of Love; above, the stars; beyond, in the cypress avenues, the fire-flies, mystic and alluring; below, the scattered lights of Florence gemming the valley of the Arno—all the distance ringed by the faint hills melting into the evening dark.

And there she, Aprilis, might sit, one of that gracious and beautiful company, richly vestured, with the one who was the greatest in that hidden city in the hollow, at her feet; there she might be praised, admired, courted,

there she might spend her days with the things she loved—music, verse, witty conversation, luxury, and power,—as did Arcangela the Venetian, and Fiora, the beloved of Cardinal dei Medici.

Aprilis could not tell what instinct held her back from the life she most desired; had she not always been taught to value her beauty as the passport to all her desires?

Had she not always been trained to believe that once she was married she might choose her own *cavaliere servente*, with none to forbid her?

Platonic love was the fashion, so she had always been told—a delicate game for which she felt fitted, a perilous game; yet she was sure of herself—even if she played it with Piero dei Medici.

Why might she not—why might she not?

The promise to Cristofano began to grow as dim in her mind as his own image; he neither wrote nor sent messages, all her news of him came from her father, who told her the Albizzi was immersed in affairs in Milan.

Aprilis had no interest in these; he did not care, was indifferent as Astorre had been, and she too came to be as indifferent to her husband as she had been to the Gherardesca.

She longed to be loved, to be valued, to be caressed; why must she refuse the only love and caresses that had been offered her?

She wished for luxury and splendour; why must she turn her back on it when it came her way? The little farm became daily more hateful to her, the gossip of the peasants, their thoughtless songs as they went about their work; her solitary meals, with the home-made

bread, oil and wine, the plainly-cooked food in the rough dishes, became almost intolerable to her.

She even came to dislike the wide and lovely view, the Certosa of the Val d'Ema, looking like a fortified castle set in the valley, the beautiful hills and the far-set cottages and churches on the distant heights.

The nearest was San Michele, which stood on the hill opposite the house, the orchards of the Albizzi filling the hollow between.

The clang of the bell, ringing for festival, funeral, or worship, was almost as incessant as the endless whirr of the crickets and grasshoppers.

The bell had no message for Aprilis ; on Sundays she headed the little procession that wound through the fields to the church, and sat in the seat reserved for Cristofano, with his people behind her ; but the service did not touch her, she was always glad when it was over and she was out again in the little piazza, planted with tall cypress trees and burnt dry and dusty with the long suns of summer.

Now there was nothing growing but the olives and the vines between ; the white oxen dragging small wooden ploughs broke up the hard, yellow earth ; the peasants mounting double ladders, twisted from bent boughs, pruned and trimmed the vines, cutting away the leaves from the bunches of grapes.

The heat did not diminish, but day after day was clouded heavily, threatening the longed-for rain that never came. Thunder rolled continually round the hills, and the lightning darted from the black heavens ; this was more intolerable to Aprilis than the blazing sun, such weather brought with it excitement, unrest, and rebellion.

She would sit in the large, dark, tapestried room upstairs with her embroidery frame idle before her, watching the lightning flash through the bare fruit trees and across the dark purple hills, listening to the thunder which seemed now overhead and now far away, thinking over the past that had been so dull, the one adventure that had been so fatal, and the present and the future that were so blank.

And when the bronze bells of San Michele, answered by the distant clang of those of Santa Margharita, rang out across the darkened valleys, Aprilis seemed to hear in their deep notes no summons to prayer or worship, but the words of Lorenzo dei Medici's carnival song as she had heard them sung by the wolf-mask in the Via Larga the first day of the Carnival of San Giovanni.

> " Quant e bella giovinezza
> Ma si fugge tuttavia
> Chi vuol esser lieto, sia
> Di doman non c'è certezza ! "

And what was she doing with her youth—letting it slip through her fingers, and who cared ?

She believed there was no one who appreciated her sacrifice ; her gratitude to Cristofano, which had been so fresh and vivid, was fading.

He had her father's money, which enabled him to indulge his ambitions in Milan ; how could she tell he was not enchained by some dark Northern beauty at the court of the Sforza and Beatrice D'Este, how be sure he would ever return to her—and how face his coming if he did ?

After a week of the dry thunderstorms the heat be-

came insupportable ; the very air seemed to burn, the earth gaped and cracked, the leaves hung limp on the trees, the vines fainted on the poles ; at the back of the house where the view looked across the Arno to the Casentino and Vallombrosa the hills were continually hidden by the lowering purple-black clouds.

At night there were neither moon nor stars visible—a burning blackness, lit only by the fire-flies, enclosed the earth.

Aprilis drooped into languor ; the house was dark and airless, not built for luxury or even for comfort. When Caterina brought her the bronze jug of water, which had been toiled up from the well under the mulberry tree at the foot of the slope beneath the terrace, and turned it into the coarse earthenware basin in her chamber, she thought of the bathroom of Cardinal dei Medici, the cool marble, the shaded lights, the rose trees, the silk-cushioned couch and the endless stream of pure water ; she stretched her slim body luxuriously at the remembrance, and her melancholy increased.

One day no praying in the chapel would help her, no petitions to fair-haired Madonnas in fine silk gowns assist her ; she went upstairs to her dark bedchamber, took the letter Fiora had given her from the hiding-place and read it, standing at the window, by the sullen light of the thundrous heavens.

It was from Piero dei Medici.

Aprilis had known this, yet the confirmation of her knowledge made her heart shake.

" MADONNA,—Thou hast forgotten me, but thee I cannot forget. For thee I would endure much peril.

Two days from the day you receive this I shall be at the early Mass in Santa Margharita al Montici. I shall return past your gate. Two days later I shall be at the Porta San Giorgio towards the seventeenth hour, and on the 21st day of September I shall wait at the bottom of the steps leading to San Miniato from an early hour in the morning. Shall there be no word for me any of these times, may I not see thee, even but in passing ? "

The paper was signed in a bold writing " Piero," and something in the brief wording made Aprilis think he had written it himself and not had it dictated by a Court poet.

She thrust the paper back into the hiding-place and returned to the window.

Leaning her sick head against the mullions she stared out at the stormy evening.

The spire of San Michele had a bleached, bone-like look against the purple blackness of the sky and the green blackness of the cypress trees, a fitful gleam of light from the setting sun picked out the pale buildings of the Certosa from the shadows of the frowning hills.

Two of the appointments had passed—the third was for to-morrow.

It would be easy for her to go to-morrow to San Miniato.

She was not closely watched now, her days were her own, it would not be difficult to find some excuse to be rid of Caterina for a while.

She did not mean to go, she told herself, yet she thought over the possibility of going until her cheeks flamed with excitement.

Twice he had waited for her or some message from her—he, Piero dei Medici.

Her heart leapt with pride to think that though he had but feigned at first to admire her, to inflict an insult on his enemy the Gherardesca, yet now he wanted her for herself ; then a chilliness touched her—was it because she was the wife of the Albizzi, intriguing against him in Milan, that he wished now to court her ?

Impatiently she dismissed these entangled and treacherous thoughts.

He was there ; he stood for all she wanted, what he offered she might take or leave ; it came to that, the decision lay in her hands.

That night the storm at length broke.

Aprilis, lying under the thin sheet in the low, heavy bed, felt the cool wind blow through the open window, and heard the steady downrush of the rain.

She sat up and pulled back the curtains with feverish hands that she might enjoy the gusts of fresh air.

It was impossible to sleep ; the storm without and her own beating heart within kept her broad awake.

She lit the thick yellow candle by the bedside and put it on the chest in the far end of the chamber, where the draught could not touch it, and standing barefoot on the coarse, red-brick floor, listened to the thunder with a certain exultation.

Presently she looked into the dim recesses of the glass near which the candle stood.

The wide red flame was mirrored there, and beyond it her own face, flushed rosy, pale skin and golden hair, against the black background of shadows.

Her smooth and delicate shoulders rose above the

clinging white nightshift, the perfumed and curled locks hung in fine strands across the fine neck and fluttered across the round throat.

Aprilis drew herself erect, gazing at that image of herself, then sank on the couch beneath the mirror and put her hand to her heart.

The thunder was louder now ; it broke overhead with a force that made the girl quake.

She vaguely remembered Cristofano—her gratitude to him and her promise ; she tried to pray, but no words would come ; she went on her knees, but remained dumb, thinking always of Piero and not of Heaven.

" It is no use ! " she cried at last aloud. " I love the Medici, and if he calls I must go to him ! " The thunder drowned her words, but there was relief in the outspoken confession.

" To-morrow I shall see him," she said, and rose to her feet.

The violence of the storm passed, the drenching rain ceased ; between the rents of the wind-riven clouds the glitter of the stars showed.

Aprilis returned to the bed ; as she lay there she saw one of these stars in the light square of the window ; she watched this till she fell asleep.

The morning was serene and fair. Aprilis rose and drank her milk and ate her brown bread as usual. Then she returned to her chamber, and taking off her plain gown put on one of rich violet silk, the sleeves cut over gold, a treasure much cherished but never worn.

Concealing this under a light, long mantle of fine black cloth, and taking such money as she could find in

her satchel, Aprilis waited her opportunity and crept out of the house.

She passed two of the peasants on her way to the gate, but they saluted her unsuspectingly ; it was not unusual for her to walk alone in the grounds. The gates between the sentinel cypresses stood open. Aprilis stepped out on to the narrow, dusty road and turned at once across the fields towards San Miniato.

It was the first time that Aprilis had been out alone ; the sense of freedom half bewildered, half frightened her ; it seemed as if every passer-by must stop her ; being yet early she met few, and these she passed with a hurried, guilty step.

Twice she missed the way and had to retrace her path ; she had always been past San Miniato on horseback, the farthest way, by the road.

It was not long, however, before she came out on the slope above the Porta San Niccolò, and the sudden sight of Florence lying directly below her made her pause.

The great city, rose-colour and pearl-white in the sunshine, the noble walls, the stately towers, the vast dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, the dark embattled towers of the Palazzo of the Signoria, the flash of the river between the straight fronts of the houses—all the detail of house and church, palace and fortification showed clear and yet remote.

She was impressed, as Cristofano and Andrea had been when they had walked above Florence, by something about the city that was so much nobler than anything in her children, by some impalpable presence or atmosphere that elevated man's work above man,

that made it a symbol of all the loftiness to which humanity could never attain, yet which must lurk somewhere in the aspirations even of common men or they could not raise such towers, build such a city.

Aprilis could understand the love of Florence, the passion for the town in the abstract ; ill had the mighty city treated her worthiest sons, but they had loved her to the end, and, exiled, had toiled the hills to glimpse her walls in the distance.

More slowly Aprilis moved towards San Miniato ; she thought of Cristofano, still banished, of how the Medici had cast the Albizzi out from where they had once been great, and a certain resentment stirred her. The Medici were tyrants, lording a free republic ; her pride of the free Florentine reminded her of that as she looked down at her city.

The black and white front of the church and the blaze of gold mosaic above the porch were now clearly visible through the surrounding beeches and pines, but Aprilis did not hurry, nor more than glance at the height where San Miniato stood—her gaze was ever to her left, on Florence.

She had defied the Medici at Cafaggiuolo and forced him to let her go scathless—she had told him he was neither prince nor master, and that his rule was not long to be endured.

Yet now she was going to him, putting herself in his hands, answering his call, putting herself on a level with the girl from the streets of Venice who amused his idleness.

Aprilis hated herself ; not because of Cristofano, not because of her father, or her name, but because the city

that was her city had awakened in her the pride of a free woman, the disdain of the independent citizen for the tyrant, did she turn her steps away from San Miniato.

The city seemed now to call her to something higher than anything she had yet dreamed of—vague thoughts of something beyond caresses, poetry, and roses touched her. Florence had endued her daughter with something of her own pride and hardihood; so strong was this impression on Aprilis that she instinctively turned —not to the home that was still alien, but to the city that spoke to her.

Drawing the mantle about her face she turned down the steep winding path which led to the Porta San Niccolò. But a man waiting under the lovely trees that shaded the slope of San Miniato had already seen her and came with eager quickness.

Aprilis turned to face him; it was Piero dei Medici, muffled in a light white mantle.

"It pleases you to keep me waiting and then to play tricks with me!" he exclaimed with rough passion.

Aprilis trembled, but pointed with pride to the city.

"Magnifico," she answered, "when you can tame Florence you shall win me!"

Piero heard this reference to his failing power in the city with quick rage.

"If you come to mock me!" he exclaimed, and dropping the mantle he had held half across his face he tried to catch her arm.

But Aprilis was too quick for him; she turned and ran down into the shelter of Florence.

Until she had passed the gates and was hurrying

along the Lung' Arno towards the Ponte Nuovo she did not dare look back—then she glanced behind, to see that Piero was following.

Aprilis, in great agitation of mind and hardly knowing what she did, crossed the bridge and hastened aimlessly through the centre of the town. There were a great many people abroad; they all seemed too occupied to notice the unusual sight of a woman alone. Aprilis caught the words, "The prophet! the saint!" and saw on every hand signs of confusion and even alarm.

In the Piazza del Duomo she paused, exhausted, thinking to have baffled the pursuit of Piero, whom she had lost sight of. She meant to go to her father's house and ask what had happened to cause these crowds to swarm in the streets of Florence.

Leaning against the delicate white marble base of the Campanile she saw an immense number of people pressing into the Duomo, the three doors of which stood open; then while she wondered what was drawing them, Piero dei Medici came round the angle of the Batistero; pushing his way rudely through the crowd, with his hat pulled over his eyes, he came towards Aprilis. She saw his mood was black and furious—she believed him capable of seizing her in the open street.

With an instinct of terror she took the only retreat open to her; running across the Piazza she joined the crowd entering the Duomo and forced her way into the church.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PROPHET

Aprilis made her way to the portion of the church occupied by the women ; the crowd was immense, the air stifling, the dimness of the vast church seemed endless, as if this semi-darkness had neither walls nor roof, but continued for ever ; the tall, slender pillars, dimly visible in the obscurity, dwarfed the people gathered about the bases of the pedestals ; above the heads of the multitude showed the gathered lights of the candles on the altar and the high, empty, wooden pulpit.

Aprilis, in the sudden change from sunlight to gloom, still in the reaction of her self-struggle, still panting from fright, felt giddy ; her knees shook beneath her, and the thousands of figures pressing on all sides of her became confused and blurred with shadow.

Most of the people were standing, but Aprilis found a seat at the bottom of one of the clustered pillars ; next her was the short curtain separating the women from the men : beyond this she could see two whom she knew, leaning against the same column that offered her a seat—Pico della Mirandola and Andrea Salvucci. She glanced at them as if they were strangers, for the

sight of her former cavalier aroused no emotion in her heart; that they might not recognize her she turned aside and drew her hood across her face.

From the excited words of those about her she learnt that they had come to hear the last of a series of sermons that had been preached here by Fra Girolamo—the subject the building of the Ark; these sermons had been so terrible, so full of prophecies and warnings, that they had shaken Florence.

Aprilis, in the Villa Albizzi, had never heard of them; in her few visits to the money-lender there had been no one to speak to her of Savonarola; it impressed her now with almost sinister force what power this friar must have to gather together all these people to hang upon his words; she vaguely wondered what this power was, if he could really help any of this multitude, if he could help her in her troubles, her broken life, if he could teach her to forget Piero dei Medici.

The preacher, it seemed, often kept the people waiting hours, sometimes did not come at all; he was directed, they said, by visions and celestial admonitions, particularly those received by Fra Silvestro, and went or stayed away as that monk directed; sometimes, too, he himself fell into ecstasies in his cell and was too weak to come to the Duomo.

On this occasion the multitude had been waiting hours, and began to express fears that Fra Girolamo would not come, but would send Fra Domenico in his stead.

The crowd swayed to and fro, murmuring complaints of thirst, of fatigue, of heat, but none of them moved from their places.

Aprilis saw that the Conte Mirandola was haggard as a figure of death, and leant heavily against the pillar as if near fainting with exhaustion; he was pressed close by dyers, tanners, and cloth workers still in their rough clothes, who wiped the sweat from their faces with the corners of their aprons, but the young noble gave no sign of impatience.

The excitement, the expectation, became more and more intense; it seemed as if every one was waiting for a sign from heaven, a miracle, a wonder. Several children fainted, and there was a confusion while they were lifted up, but those with them did not leave.

A woman slipped to her knees, from her knees fell forward in a fit, clutching her rosary; the other women dragged her up and laid her on a bench. There were murmurs, cries, sobs; some wrung their hands and openly lamented; terror on the edge of panic seemed to be abroad.

Aprilis found herself affected. Savonarola, who had hitherto been but an indifferent name to her, now became a terrific personality, for whose coming she waited with trembling eagerness.

She forgot her fatigue, the heat, Piero dei Medici, her forsaken home, and was absorbed in the common expectation.

The hours crept round; though Mass had long been over and there was nothing to wait for but the sermon, no one stirred; more people crowded in, filling the spaces about the doors until they would no longer open; immense as the church was it was now full to suffocation, the air was dull and heavy with the enclosed breath of so many human beings, the heat was such as to cause

giddiness; the steady pulsation of the altar candles, the empty pulpit, became intolerable to Aprilis; she could have shrieked aloud.

Hiding her face with her hands she tried to withdraw herself into darkness.

A whisper shook the crowd, some one near the altar had seen the black and white figure of a Dominican; the news was passed from mouth to mouth—was it Fra Domenico or Fra Girolamo?

People tiptoed, pushed forward, mounted on the bases of the pillars.

A figure was seen mounting the winding stairs to the pulpit, and a name shuddered from lip to lip like a wind rushing from tree to tree in a forest.

"Savonarola—Savonarola! the prophet! the prophet! Savonarola!"

He gained the pulpit and, coming to the front, looked over the crowd that had now hushed into an utter silence—a silence in which each one held his breath.

His cowl was pushed back from his head, his black cloak fell straightly apart over the white robe, his hands gripped the edge of the pulpit.

Aprilis had never seen him before; the sight of him smote her with terror and fear as if she had suddenly looked on something superhuman. His great height seemed unearthly and his features had lost all likeness to ordinary mankind. Drained of all blood, disfigured by sleeplessness, self-inflicted torture, and penance, his harsh gaunt face seemed that of a creature from another world.

In the deep orbits of the eyes, in the hollow of the cheeks, below the thick lips, black shadows lay; where

the light touched his face it showed as yellow as parchment; his hands, gripping the pulpit edge, showed curved, crooked, powerful as the hands of an eagle clutching the rock.

He stood motionless, silent, while his eyes, which could be seen glowering with a steady but ferocious light like those of a madman, flashed across the crowded cathedral.

Not a whisper broke the stillness, every one was white, rigid, at attention.

To Aprilis the tension was unendurable, she had to put her hands to her throat to stifle a scream; she could not take her eyes from that monstrous figure in the pulpit which seemed to hang above the crowd with an air of threat, almost of vengeance, and yet which seemed impalpable, inhuman, as if but a creation of the mind.

Still he neither moved nor spoke.

Pico della Mirandola shuddered from head to foot; he fixed his eyes with an anguish of entreaty on the figure of the preacher and his lips formed the words—"Speak! speak!"

Suddenly Savonarola raised his hands above his head so that the black robe seemed to blow out like wings behind him, and a cry that rose to a shriek split the silence and rang through every corner of the cathedral.

"Behold, I will bring a flood upon the earth!"

The tones of the speaker were charged with superhuman agony, superhuman pride and power; with the force and clearness of an iron-tongued bell they echoed in the farthest recesses of the church, so that there was no one who did not hear the terrible cry.

"Behold, I will bring a flood upon the earth!"

A great shudder ran through the multitude; all seemed to quiver and bend before the friar as blades of grass before the whirlwind; they were dumb and shaken as if in the presence of God Himself. Leaning over the edge of the pulpit Fra Girolamo began to speak.

His sentences beat on one another with a passion that was a delirium, his pealing phrases were almost incoherent, but through all ran the scarlet theme of doom and destruction, ruin and judgment.

Like one intoxicated with spiritual wine he spoke —like one unconscious of himself through extreme of anguished exaltation.

"O Florence! O Rome! O Italy! the time for singing and dancing is over! A mighty wind has arisen which shall wither all your flowers! Instead of carnival songs shall come the rattle of the death cart, and the dead shall lie unburied on all your pleasant places! Corruption shall stink where there was once sweet perfume, tears of blood shall be shed where once was the playing of viols! Ye who boasted to be free shall be as slaves, your own wanton sins shall become whips for your backs, fathers shall rend their sons and sons slay their fathers, the land shall be laid waste and sown with salt, the towers of Italy shall crumble before the breath of the Lord! And Rome shall perish in her wickedness, and in her own abomination shall she stifle! O Rome, there is a mandate gone forth and a fiat sounded that no penitence can avert! Prepare, therefore, to perish as of old perished the cities of the plain! And you, O Florence! repent in time, cast out this armed man from your midst who sets his heel upon your neck! eschew your wickedness, your vanity,

for vengeance is at hand! Have I not foretold it? Have ye lacked of signs and wonders? Popes and prelates, princes and learned men fail of their dominion and are but a handful of dust beneath the glance of the Lord! Tardy is vengeance but sure, and when it cometh who is so brave but he will veil his face?"

Aprilis sank against the pillar; her senses reeled, the thunder of the friar's discourse passed her uncomprehended, save only in the awful warning that was his main theme.

New thoughts, new terrors were opened to her; she had been vain, thoughtless, and wicked; at remembrance of her sins she shuddered to the heart!

She had contributed to the damnation of Florence—she would share in the judgment.

If what Fra Girolamo said was true—if God was there, waiting with a drawn sword!

How should she face it, Aprilis who had never thought of anything but pleasure!

A frightful terror seized her; her limbs trembled, her throat parched, her eyes smarted, she longed to fling herself on her face and cry out for mercy. She saw that all those about her were in the same agony; the preacher swayed the crowd to one emotion of fear and horror; no one escaped his influence.

Like people drugged they swayed together blindly, clutching at each other, stammering and weeping.

The friar's voice sank:

"I have tried to avert this ruin, O Florence! With my words I have tried to warn! but who would listen? Now I can do no more! O Lord, hear me, I can do no more! I have no words left, O Florentines, only tears!"

His voice fell until on the last sentence it was but an awful whisper which penetrated the crowd like a fine sword.

With a great sob the preacher collapsed and, convulsively clutching the black crucifix at his girdle, fell forward against the edge of the pulpit in a passion of tears.

Delirium, hysteria, seized the crowd ; as if Death were stalking among them they huddled together in terror.

Aprilis dropped on her knees by the column ; she thought the floor would crack and swallow them, the Angel of Judgment cleave the walls with his sword.

Pressed in as she was by the other women, she threw up her arms and cried " Mercy ! "

The word was taken up and repeated ; from the vast crowd rose cry after cry :

" Mercy ! mercy ! "

" Lord have mercy ! Lord save us ! "

The friar staggered to his feet and, without looking at the crowd, turned and descended from the pulpit, his head bent low on his breast, and while he turned away like a beaten man he was pursued by the hysteric cries :

" Mercy ! mercy ! I repent my sins ! "

Aprilis was almost stifled ; huddled on her knees with her face pressed against the base of the column, the surge of terrified women round her was almost trampling her to death.

The hood fell back from her distorted face and tumbled golden hair.

The curtain near her had been dragged down, and Andrea de Salvucci, shaking himself from the spell of terror on him, turned and saw her almost at his feet.

" Aprilis ! "

She looked at him indifferently ; he lifted her to her feet and supported her ; unresisting she suffered him to lead her from the church.

When they had at last forced through the press and gained the outer air, Aprilis paused. The sight of Florence, fair, free in the brilliant sunshine, effaced the first impression of the nightmare of the friar's sermon ; she glanced down at her violet dress, which she had put on for the pleasure of the Medici, and began to laugh.

" Where shall I take you ? " asked Andrea.

" Nowhere—I go alone to my father's house," she answered, looking at him and speaking to him as if he was a stranger. " But this monk—what is he ?—is he a prophet ? "

" A prophet ! " cried Andrea wildly. " Have you not heard ? Do you not know what this terror over Florence means ? The French have crossed the Alps—Charles of France is descending on Rome, Naples, Florence."

Aprilis could scarce believe the words.

" He spoke true, then ; he is a prophet," she whispered. " What will happen now ? "

" Florence will be free once more," replied Andrea fiercely. " The Medici must go and we must listen to Savonarola—the prophet ! "

BOOK SECOND

THE CARNIVAL OF FRA GIROLAMO

" Fallace vita ! O nostra vana cura !
Lo spirito è fuor del mio petto spinto :
O Cristo Galileo, tu hai vinto."

LORENZO DEI MEDICI.

CHAPTER I

VISIONS

Fra Girolamo sat in the third of the three cells which formed the apartments of the Prior at the Convent of San Marco.

It was where he slept, and contained nothing beside the wooden bed and a stool; near the foot of the bed was a shrine in the wall where on occasions the Eucharist was exposed; here Cosimo dei Medici, the founder of the convent, had often retired to pray and meditate when tired with the burden of ruling Florence.

Savonarola leant forward on his stool and supported his head in his hands; he was weary and troubled and sad.

Without doubt he was now the greatest man in Florence, the prophet justified, the leader to whom all men looked; since he had foretold the coming of Charles of France, all turned to him to guide and save them now the French were marching triumphantly on Florence, glorified with successes at Genoa, in the Romagna, and at Rapallo, and encouraged by the magnificent reception given them by Ludovico Sforza at Milan.

Fra Girolamo had encouraged the Florentines to look upon Charles as their deliverer, the "New Cyrus" who would drive forth their enemies, the Medici, and restore

the Republic. Popular feeling was strongly in favour of the French, who came, not to make war on them, but on the King of Naples ; this being the purpose for which Charles had been invited to Italy by the Sforza.

The friar had himself great faith in the champion whose coming he had foretold, the sword of the Lord, who should smite all the wickedness of Italy and raise up the oppressed, who should put down the Borgia and restore the ancient purity of the Church.

He had had visions in which it had been revealed to him that Charles was elected for this great work, and he desired his coming with impatience.

Florence now eagerly waited on his words, and he was daily visited by prominent citizens seeking his advice ; the number of those who wished to join the Dominican order became more than the convent would hold ; the name of the prophet was on every lip ; all turned, in the hour of need, from the Medici to the friar. The position of the Magnifico was desperate : both the advancing army and the people of Florence were against him, and his cousins Lorenzo and Giovanni had escaped from their villas where he had imprisoned them and joined the French.

Piero, without friends or money, with his terrible enemy turning all against him in his native city and a foreign force with whom Florence was in sympathy marching against him, was fast slipping from power.

He had sent a small company of horse and foot to Sarzana, one of the powerful fortified towns protecting the approach to Florence, and soon after had himself left the city.

In all this there was nothing but cause of joy and

triumph for Savonarola; yet he was troubled—his visions had failed him of late, and he had heard disquieting rumours.

Charles, his champion who was coming to regenerate the Church, had fallen ill on the road through his own excesses, and had suffered the Swiss, his mercenaries, to cruelly massacre the garrison at Rapallo.

Savonarola tried not to believe these things, but the report of them had saddened him, and he could get no enlightenment from the future, the heavens were dark to his appeal, his long fainting vigils passed without visions or voices, and without these spiritual comforts the friar was like one lost in confusion.

Other signs and miracles had not been lacking; an anchorite in the sanctuary at Vallombrosa had seen phantom armies sweeping through the lonely fir woods round his retreat, a solitary shepherd had seen a ghostly horseman with a raised sword thundering along the dangerous defiles of the Consuma pass at Prato, tears had been found on the face of the image of the Madonna della Cintola, and the inhabitants of San Gimignano had been startled by thunder from a clear sky and the tones of a dreadful voice echoing after.

Last night Fra Silvestro Maruffi had walked in his sleep and afterwards declared he had seen visions. Savonarola on hearing this had eagerly sent for the monk: both he and Fra Domenico believed implicitly in the visions of Fra Silvestro, though Maruffi constantly denied their divine origin.

Savonarola mused on this while he waited for the monk; he wondered why the angels should appear to one so weak in mind and body, one who disbelieved in

the marvels of which he was the vessel; yet he had a great reverence for Fra Silvestro, both because he was a seer and because he was sick and hideous. When Maruffi entered the cell the Prior rose and offered him the stool, but Fra Silvestro struggled to the end of the bed and sat there embracing his knees.

"Dear brother," said Savonarola anxiously, "thou hadst visions last night?"

"Fine visions! fine visions!" answered Maruffi; his head shook on his shoulders, his eyes were red-rimmed, and when he ceased speaking his tongue rested between his loose lips.

"Tell me," said the Prior eagerly. "To me, alas! nothing has been vouchsafed!"

Fra Silvestro put his rough, dirty hand to his forehead and answered stupidly:

"I had them all *here*, but they are gone! Let them go!"

"Nay, brother, sweet brother, recall them," urged Fra Girolamo. "The times are terrible, and it is very needful that we know what the spirits say! Speak, speak! What didst thou see this night?"

Fra Silvestro stared at the Prior with his watery, pitiful eyes filled with a sad wildness; he rocked his heavy body to and fro so that the truckle bed creaked and shook.

"I saw the Borgia!" he said with a shudder of reluctance. "And his tiara was flaming with stars, circlets of stars! In front of him were his two sons, Cæsare and Gandia, and before them all a naked woman on a goat—white, white the woman and the goat, and her hair was gold and his horns were gold, and she drove

him through the surf of the sea, and as his hoofs struck the water they splashed up great showers of pearls—and the three were after her, panting in pursuit ! "

Savonarola crossed himself.

" It was Lucrezia Borgia ! "

" Yea ! " replied Maruffi wildly, " it was she ! Do they not say her father and her brothers pine for her daily ? But she is in Ferrara with her fourth husband, and they cannot reach him because he has fine guns—great cannon drawn by sleek oxen ! "

" Speak not of these things," shuddered the Prior, " for they are of Devildom, and the mind may not contemplate them and remain sane ! What meant this fearful vision, brother, what meant it ? "

" I do not know," said Maruffi sullenly.

" It was a vision of the abominations of Rome, which will soon be overthrown," mused Fra Girolamo.

Fra Silvestro cried out in sudden excitement :

" I remember now ! I remember now ! I saw the Medici, Piero, Giovanni, and Guiliano, flying out of Florence, and all their women after them, shrieking like little rabbits ! And the sun was like blood, dried and brown, and presently it burst into flame and drops of fire fell on Florence ! "

" All this," said Savonarola in a voice trembling with excitement, " confirms what I have even said ! "

" But the fire fell on San Marco," answered Maruffi in a cunning tone, " and the convent was burnt, and all the brethren and *you* were burning, and you rolled on the ground and shrieked and shrieked ! "

The Prior made a movement of uncontrollable agitation, and took a step across the cell.

" It may be," he muttered ; " have I not always foreseen it—the sharpening of the sword, the wearing of the Martyr's crown ? "

" If thou art a prophet," cried Fra Silvestro with sudden energy, " foretell thy doom and ours ! Save us from the fire I saw last night ! "

Savonarola turned his dark, bloodless face towards the other monk.

" Who said I was a prophet ? who gave me that terrible name ? " He shuddered. " Who said I could read the future ? I did but interpret the signs plain to any man."

" A prophet ! a prophet ! " cried Maruffi. " Thou art a prophet ! Thou hast said so—the people acclaim thee ! Save us, O prophet ! bring us to glory and avert the sword and the flames ! "

Savonarola gazed at him with eyes that held the superhuman fire and steadiness of insanity, and did not speak.

The monk leapt from the bed and seized the Prior by the arms.

" Who assures thee," he said shrewdly, " that my visions and thine own are not of the Devil ? "

Savonarola started as if a red-hot iron had touched his emaciated and tortured flesh ; drops of anguish gathered on his forehead.

" Who assures thee," continued Maruffi, " that thy prophecies are not of the Evil One ? Who promises thee thou art not being lured to damnation ? Who gave thee a charter to speak against the wickedness of Rome ? Maybe we are all deceived by fiends who will forsake us, maybe we shall fall down, down, down ! "

The Prior shook himself free and cried out in passionate agony :

"Thou knowest that is false! What I have seen and heard is of Christ and the angels! Say thou knowest that!"

"Nay, I know it not," muttered Fra Silvestro, "and if *thou* art so sure why do my doubts move thee?"

Fra Girolamo trembled.

"Dost thou not think I have my black moments when all seemeth a deception? But it is not so; I am not deceived—I *have* been inspired—through me God *hath* spoken!"

He leant heavily against the wall and put his hand to his damp forehead with a gesture of exhaustion. Fra Silvestro shook his head sadly.

"I think my visions are of the Devil," he said vaguely; "they come with pain and suffering; I fall on the ground and beat my head; I suffer, I suffer! I wish I had no visions. Let us go into the fields and pick flowers; it is pleasant at Fiesole or Vallombrosa, father; let us go to Vallombrosa and forget the visions!"

Savonarola raised his ghastly face, which was distorted with a terrible look of exaltation, and gazed at the roof of the cell as if his glance could penetrate wood and stone and eternal space and challenge God on His throne.

"I am a true prophet!" he cried. "Why should I be humble? I am the vessel of the Lord's messages to men! I have not been deceived; I shall not be forsaken!"

He turned swiftly on Maruffi and clutched him by the shoulder—his flaming energy, his feverish strength, contrasting grotesquely with the weak apathy of the other.

"Say thou knowest I am not deceived!" he cried in a terrible voice.

Maruffi whimpered in his grip.

" Let us go into the woods and hear the birds, let us pick flowers ! " he cried stupidly ; " let us have peace ! peace ! "

Savonarola released him.

" There is no peace," he answered fiercely. " *Gladius Domini super terram cito et velociter !* "

Maruffi twisted his hands together.

" Wouldst *thou* rule Florence ? " he asked slyly, screwing up his ugly, coarse face.

" All Italy if it were given me," replied the Prior feverishly, " aye, all the world ! "

" Thou lookest to be great—to be greater than the Pope ? "

" Is not he who redeems Christ's Church greater than the Pope ? The things that I shall do will be famous for all time."

Maruffi began shambling up and down the narrow cell; he moved from side to side to ease his feet, which were sore and chafed in the hard worn sandals.

" The sins of Italy are multiplied," said Savonarola, " and now she is to be scourged pure from them ! I am that scourge in the hands of Christ ! "

He sank down on the stool and put his hands before his face.

" Give me food," said Maruffi. " I must eat. I have pains in my head. Give me a capon and the wine of Ruffina—give me pasties and the thick wines of Sicily ! "

" Stay," implored the Prior. " Stay and watch with me, sweet brother ! "

" Visions ! " shrieked Fra Silvestro. " No more visions of clotted blood and fire ! Come into the fresh air—let us eat—let us drink ! "

And flapping his arms at his sides he began imitating with great skill the gurgling and crowing of a cock.

"Pray with me," murmured Fra Girolamo. "I am faint—I am weak—sweet Silvestro, stay with me—watch with me!"

"May you be devoured by flies!" answered Maruffi angrily, and hastened from the cell, banging the door after him violently.

Savonarola lifted his face from his hands, rose, and staggered to the bed.

He felt giddy, the four plain walls of the cell seemed to wave and bend, the square of light of the window dropped and rose in its place.

His limbs were stiff and sore with long kneeling, with the hard bed, with his private scourging; his back ached and throbbed from the irritation of the hair shirt; the heavy robe galled his shoulders; the first damp mists of autumn were abroad in Florence, and had brought the pains of rheumatism into his bones; his sufferings began to affect his mind; as he sat huddled at the end of the bed despair flooded his soul.

"O Lord, send a sign that I am not deceived!" he muttered. "Send a sign!"

But he felt that this prayer was useless, and presently sat silent, holding his hot head in his hot hands.

"If I achieve what I have undertaken I shall be great," he thought; and this reflection comforted him.

He turned his eyes to the shrine, which in absence of the Eucharist contained a crucifix of rough, unstained wood, which had once belonged to San Antonino.

But now Savonarola saw no crucifix, but a woman's

face looked from the alcove as a maid might look from her window at her lover below.

And the countenance was that of Laodamia Strozzi, whom Fra Girolamo had known years before in Ferrara.

Knowing her he had loved her, and loving her for a brief space he had indulged in dreams of earthly happiness and thought the world beautiful. But when he had told her of his love she had repulsed him with a proud reminder of the difference in their ranks.

His sensitive soul had been bitterly wounded, and once and for ever he had turned from worldly things.

For ever had the daughter of the banished Florentine been dismissed from his mind; a more intense, a stronger passion had absorbed every fibre of his being; for years he had completely forgotten her; now, when he turned for comfort to the cross, he saw instead her face.

In a delirium of wrath he sprang up and cast his rosary at the phantom loveliness, which disappeared like the glow of rainbow colour on falling water and left the shrine and the crucifix visible.

Savonarola fell on his knees, then on his face, with his outflung hands clutching the fallen rosary.

For a while he saw the face of Laodamia Strozzi illuminating the darkness, her hair blowing thither and hither like a taper of wax in a windy place; then her unkind and cold fairness disappeared, and the blackness before the eyes of Savonarola became intense like the blackness of a deep pit.

This darkness seemed to invade his very soul; like an inrush of a deadly sea it overwhelmed him, then through the depths a glimmer of celestial glory appeared, a pale immortal star rising on the hill of Calvary. And

against this heavenly brightness appeared the black form of the cross.

The light grew brighter, and the form of the cross steadier, until Savonarola could distinguish the features of Him who hung there.

An exquisite rapture tingled in the monk's veins; he rose to his knees and flung his arms wide.

"O Christ! O Lord! O Love! Shall I not make Thee King of Florence—nay, of all Italy!" he murmured joyously.

From the dark and awful shape of the cross the figure bent, humanity being absorbed into the Divine, suffering that had transcended suffering, love that had transcended love, sacrifice that had transcended all sacrifice. White and pure as an ivory-coloured cloud the Figure leant forward and extended welcoming arms to the friar; the drops of blood in the palms of the hands shone like jewels.

"It is true!" cried Savonarola. "I am not deceived!"

He swayed forward, and the Divine arms caught him and he felt himself sinking into perfect repose upon the breast of God.

"O Christ! O Lord! O Love!"

All pain left his bruised body, a sensation of perfect ease overcame him, he lost all sensation of weight and substance, it seemed that his soul, like an essence, was being poured out before his Lord.

Fra Domenico, coming to his cell, found him unconscious on the floor.

They revived him with wine and cordials, for it was two days since he had eaten.

CHAPTER II

THE FLYING TOY

THAT evening the Prior was told that Cristofano degli Albizzi had come to the convent.

Savonarola remembered the young man's visit to Milan and that he had always proclaimed himself one of his adherents.

The Prior was not anxious to secure dominion by worldly intrigue; indeed, he wished to withdraw himself as much as possible from politics and to influence Florence purely spiritually, as was his mission; nor did he greatly believe in the Albizzi, from whom he had not heard since he went to Lombardy.

Nevertheless he saw Cristofano; it was not his habit to refuse any one.

He received him in the second cloister of San Domenico, and they conversed walking under the convent arches. It was a fine autumn evening, the sky clear and pale, the air fresh and sweet; no flowers were left in the little square of garden, but the palms and laurels still showed green and vigorous.

Cristofano found a delicate change in the atmosphere of the place, even in the air of the Prior; neither seemed

any longer remote and set apart from the affairs of men, but rather full of the echoes of the world.

"You are just back from Milan?" asked Fra Girolamo with a certain keenness.

"I arrived to-day, father. I travelled with the French army as far as Spezia, then came on ahead."

"You found a welcome with the French?"

"As long as they receive no opposition they are friendly to Florence, and they had seen me at the Sforza's Court and knew I was no adherent of the Medici. There are many Italians with King Charles, the Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli urging him to fall on the Borgia; the two Medici, Lorenzo and Guiliano, urging him to fall on Piero——"

"They do well," remarked Savonarola quietly. "The King of France has been sent by God to purge and punish Italy."

Cristofano gave him a quick glance.

"A strange champion," he remarked. "No one would think His Majesty the elect of Heaven."

"You do not think well of this king?" asked the friar; and he thought uneasily of the massacre of the men of Rapallo and the sack of the castle of Frizzano, which news had lately come to his ears, and the stories of Charles's debaucheries at Milan and Asti.

"I think he may be useful," smiled Cristofano. "He may serve the purpose."

Savonarola was silent; he consoled himself by remembering that God did not always choose splendid instruments to work His will; if Charles fulfilled His divine mission much might be forgiven him.

"Father," continued the Albizzi earnestly, "this

much I have learnt in Milan—Charles and the Sforza will protect Florence against the Medici."

"Ah!" cried the friar angrily, "it is well for Ludovico Sforza to meddle! He is a worse tyrant than Piero dei Medici. What of Gian Galeazzo, who died but now in prison, who was he but the rightful Duke? And did he not die suddenly in his full growth? The usurper knows something of that death, Messere."

Cristofano was surprised at the monk's knowledge of events in Milan, where it was commonly believed, even by his French allies, that Ludovico had poisoned his young nephew, the rightful Duke.

"Such as the Sforza is he must be used, father," he returned.

"Used?—for what ends?" inquired Fra Girolamo shrewdly. Cristofano was a little taken aback; he saw himself as much as ever without the confidence of the Prior.

"The Sforza invited King Charles to Italy," he replied; "there at least he has been useful."

"For what end did he ask him," demanded Savonarola—"out of hate and fear of Naples? A blind, foolish tool he has been in the hands of destiny; and this power he has called to aid his ambition will one day crush him. Let the Sforza repent while there is yet time."

The Albizzi himself thought that it was very likely that Ludovico would repent having called a foreign power into Italy, and that the mysterious and subtle policies of that potentate would recoil on himself; but Cristofano could not help feeling respect and affection for the magnificent Duke who had created so much splendour in Milan, and protected learning and art as munificently as Lorenzo dei Medici had done in those

days which now seemed dead in Florence. That he had usurped his power, imprisoned and perhaps murdered his nephew, did not greatly repel Cristofano; he remembered the Duke, charming, gentle, the brilliant centre of a brilliant Court, and wished he might emulate his rule in Florence.

"He hath made a wonder of Milan," he said, following up his thoughts out loud.

"A snare and an abomination, as was Ferrara under Duke Ercole, as Florence was, and is!" answered Savonarola fiercely.

Cristofano looked at him curiously.

"Do you hope to change Florence?" he asked.

Savonarola turned his dark, powerful eyes on the young noble.

"My son," he asked, "what do *you* hope to do in Florence?"

Cristofano flushed; he felt as if all his secret hopes and ambitions were suddenly written on his brow.

"Why all this intrigue, this running to and fro, this spying into the council of princes, this fatigue and heat in the affairs of the world?" continued the friar. "You named yourself my follower, then let these things be, and let God redeem Florence."

"I would cast the Medici out of the city they misrule and abuse," said the Albizzi abruptly. "I would free the Republic."

"A great man and a mighty house have you set your hand against," answered Savonarola; "do you think you shall prevail against them? Leave it to the Lord, who in His good time will set down the Medici and all the other tyrants of Italy—yea, even the Borgia."

" The Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli would be Pontiff," said Cristofano, thinking to test the ambition of the monk.

" It is well," replied Fra Girolamo tranquilly. " They say he is a just priest."

" Would you not be Pope ? " urged Cristofano.

" If I achieve what I have in me to achieve I shall be greater than any Pope," replied Fra Girolamo.

Cristofano glanced at his dark tall figure, at his hollow inspired face, and he began to despair of the dream which he had nourished in Milan under the delicate encouragement of Ludovico Sforza—namely, that he should use the monk's tremendous influence as a lever to raise himself to power in Florence, bringing Savonarola into Milan's schemes of aggrandizement, and eventually rewarding him with the tiara.

Now the Albizzi felt little hope of drawing Fra Girolamo into any such conspiracy.

" You your way and I mine, father," he replied rather sadly. " I was not born for the cloister, I must work with the means I can use."

" Work for what ? " demanded the Prior. " You have wealth and, I hear, a wife ; with these you should have honourable occupation."

Cristofano was silent.

" I perceive," continued Fra Girolamo, " that you are deep in intrigue and possibly plot. If these be for the re-establishment of the Republic I have nothing to say ; if you seek to put yourself in the place of Piero dei Medici——"

Cristofano paused in his slow walk and turned to him, startled.

"What makes you say that, father?" he demanded.

"Because you are of the old patrician blood, young, worldly, and ambitious."

"Well, if it be," answered Cristofano, with sudden passion, "may not a noble as well as a merchant rule in Florence?"

"No one shall rule in Florence," said Savonarola. "She shall be free. No one shall bridle and muzzle her—she shall be free; Christ alone shall be Lord of this city."

The Albizzi answered in a moved voice:

"I too love Florence—perhaps you do me less than justice."

Fra Girolamo did not answer, and the two walked in silence round the darkening cloister.

When they reached again the entrance to the outer court of the dead, Cristofano took his leave.

"I may come and see you again, father?"

"Surely," replied the Prior, "when you will."

Cristofano crossed the first cloister; the lay brothers were carrying in water from the well and baskets of salads for supper—their coarse aprons showed as patches of white in the twilight.

Several novices and pupils of the schools for painting and drawing by which the brethren supplemented their alms (since Savonarola had dispersed their property and forbidden them to have possessions), walked arm in arm over the tombs.

Several of them glanced at Cristofano's flash of scarlet and steel (for he was still armed from his journey); he wondered if they envied him; then, with that whimsicality which was in his nature, wondered if he envied them.

When he left San Marco he turned at once to the Palazzo Fiorivanti.

Ser Rosario was expecting him, and Aprilis was there, awaiting his arrival.

Her father had written to him that Aprilis had returned to his house during the last few days, he considered the Villa Albizzi lonely for a woman now there was so much alarm and disturbance abroad ; he did not add that Aprilis had arrived at his house alone and on foot the day of Savonarola's sermon on the Deluge.

Cristofano did not object ; his steward's reports had shown that the girl had lived blamelessly ; his pride satisfied in that respect, he cared little where she stayed.

During his stay in Milan her image had become dim in his mind, which was occupied with ambition and the old loves of learning and art which had been revived by the splendours of the Sforza's court. Yet he owned to a curiosity to see Aprilis again ; there was a certain pleasure in thinking of her beauty and her humility waiting for his return.

In the loggia was Ser Rosario ; he seemed aged in the last weeks, his expression was troubled and anxious ; his secret vexation was a loan lent to Carlo dei Visdomini, which the Magnifico had guaranteed and which now there seemed little chance of his recovering ; the unsettled state of the city and the rumours of the approach of the French also disquieted the careful man of business.

" Is King Charles coming ? " was his first question after he had greeted his son-in-law.

" Most certainly," replied Cristofano.

"As a friend or an enemy?" inquired the money-lender anxiously.

"As a friend to Florence, as an enemy to Piero dei Medici."

"But the Magnifico will fight?"

"He may, but Florence will not."

"The saints preserve our wits!" said Ser Rosario peevishly; "one hears so many different reports! But the French are really coming?"

"By now they are at Sarzanello or Pietrasanta."

"Robbing and murdering, as they did at Rapallo!" lamented the money-lender.

"Florence will be safe if she receives His Majesty as an ally," answered Cristofano. "Where is Aprilis?" he added, and as he spoke he crossed the threshold of the great dining-room and saw her standing by the hearth.

She lifted her eyes and smiled; the gold hair was all gathered into a fine green net, and her gown was dark blue and fell plainly from neck to feet, only slightly raised and gathered at the waist by a green cord.

A few logs of orange wood were burning on the hearth—a thin smoke arose from them and made the background to her figure.

"I am glad of your safe return," she said, and held out her hand.

As he looked at her he was suddenly and swiftly impressed by the fact that she had been lonely and sad during his absence.

"You did not care for the villa?" he asked.

"No," said Aprilis, "but I would have stayed, only I felt drawn to Florence, and when the trouble came I remained."

" There is no trouble," replied Cristofano lightly.

He seated himself and took off his gloves ; his handsome face had lately gained in power, also in a certain hardness which emphasized the worldly lines of mouth and chin.

He asked Aprilis for something to drink. Ser Rosario had left the room in a certain embarrassment, Aprilis too seemed shy ; she brought wine and mineral water in a green goblet ; he, completely at his ease, drank.

" Hast thou any news in Florence ? " he asked smilingly.

She started at the familiar form of address, which he had never used to her before ; the colour flushed her cheek.

" The Conte della Mirandola—you knew him ?—is dying," she answered.

" Dying ? "

" Every day now I see Fra Girolamo or Fra Domenico visit him—I can see his palace from my window."

" And Andrea de Salvucci ? " asked Cristofano, looking at her over the edge of the glass, " does he share his patron's love for the friar ? "

" I think he will become a monk," said Aprilis.

" Poor Andrea ! " smiled Cristofano.

He continued to look keenly at his wife ; her choice of news struck him as strange.

" Hast thou heard Savonarola preach ? " he asked, with an indifferent air.

The colour burnt more hotly in her smooth cheek as she replied :

" I heard him when he preached in the Duomo on the twenty-first of September."

" Ah ! and he moved thee ? "

Aprilis answered with a certain effort, like one endeavouring to be frank :

" I went to him afterwards—the next day, Monna Lucia and I."

" Thou in San Marco ! " and Cristofano remembered the Prior's allusion to his wife.

" He saw me in the cloister," continued the girl ; " I told him I wished to become a nun."

" Thou—a wife ! " His tone was angry and incredulous. " Thou—Aprilis ! "

She turned her eyes on him with a certain dignity and rebuke.

" I, maiden as I am, wished to find peace that way—why not, Messere ? "

" And Fra Girolamo ? "

" He sent me back to my duty, and here you find me. He treated me like a silly child—as I suppose I am, Messere."

Her lips trembled and her hands shook as she folded them together.

Pity and some amusement succeeded his wrath ; a child indeed !

" And wert thou frightened by the terrible priest ? " he smiled. " He doth not speak to such as thee, Aprilis."

" He spoke to all sinners," she answered.

Cristofano rose.

" I will set thee an easy penance for these sins, my child. Return to the villa ; it is safer than the city now, say what thy father will."

She looked up at him long and wistfully ; he could not fathom what her appealing eyes meant.

In reality she was wondering if he wanted her, if he cared for her, if he would be kind to her, if she might take some honoured place in his life, for her loneliness was unutterable.

" For the present I must stay in Florence," he added ; " but thou wilt be better without the walls."

She turned away.

" No one wants me," she thought, and the trembling spark of gratitude, almost affection, which had sprung up in her heart at sight of him, was quenched.

" As my lord wishes," she answered.

" I have brought thee something from Milan," said Cristofano, pleased with her submission.

From the large pocket of his cloak he took a box, and from this produced a curious creature between a bird and an insect, fashioned out of steel and curiously inlaid with gold.

" This was made by Messere Leonardo da Vinci, the mathematician of the Duke of Milan, who is the most wonderful man I have ever met—look, Aprilis, it flies."

He touched a spring, and the little monster rose in the air, buzzed round the room with a sharp clink of the metallic wings, and returned to the table.

Aprilis was astonished and awed ; for a while she forgot everything in the pleasure of the wonderful toy.

But when Cristofano left her with it, while he went to find her father, she found she could not wind it up herself.

The old loneliness returned.

" No one needs me, no one wants me," she thought, " save only Piero dei Medici."

CHAPTER III

THE PENITENCE OF THE CONTE DELLA MIRANDOLA

GIOVANNI PICO, Conte della Mirandola, had burnt five books of his own writing which dealt with love and loveliness, heathen wisdom and worldly learning. He sat in a deep chair by the open hearth and watched the last smouldering ashes of parchment from which the thick white smoke was slowly vanishing up the chimney.

The Conte wore a plain brown robe and leathern shoes; his fair locks, which had been so tended and cherished, and which so many women's light fingers had caressed, had been shorn away, and the shadow of death was over his face, dimming his beauty.

The portrait of the lady by Messere Leonardo da Vinci, the Minerva by Messere Sandro di Botticelli—a replica of that painted for the last Medici and showing the triumph of Lorenzo—had been removed from the walls, the shelves stood empty of profane books, there were no longer bowls of flowers or little figures of dancing girls or fauns dug up from the fresh earth of the vineyards and cornfields round Florence; above the bare stone mantelpiece that was carved with a design of grapes and apples was a black cross surmounted by a crown of thorns.

Giovanni Pico looked at this continually and spoke of

the death of Angelo Poliziano, that witty, profligate poet and friend of Lorenzo dei Medici who had recently died entreating to be buried in San Marco in the habit of a Dominican friar.

Giovanni Pico had not so many sins to repent as Angelo Poliziano, little indeed beyond the pride of life and the love of beauty, but his penitence was as deep as had been that of the poet ; and when he looked at the cross and thought of his short, useless life, and of the ineffable goodness of Christ, who had forgiven him and brought him to peace, the tears stood in his eyes.

There were two people with him, his nephew, another Giovanni Pico, son of his elder brother Galeotto, lord and tyrant of Mirandola, and Andrea de Salvucci, the secretary.

The October sun shone full into the chamber, gilding the red walls and floor and the painted ceiling where the forgotten cupids and graces sported unheeded ; a strong breeze rustled the palms in the courtyard.

" On the heights there must be a wind, a great wind," said the Conte, with a note of longing in his voice. " I would I were at Camaldoli or La Verna—there one may worship God in peace among the lonely trees."

" Yet thou wilt not leave Florence," said his nephew gently, " and would not even when the physician bade thee escape the great heat."

" I cannot be away from Fra Girolamo, I dare not," replied Mirandola. " He has held my hand through difficult places, and I will not loose it now."

He moved his head slowly on the cushion that supported it, his back ached and his limbs trembled with weakness ; he looked at the kneeling boy by his side

and then at the sombre figure of Andrea, who was locking away the unfinished manuscripts which could never be completed now.

"But I shall leave Florence," he added. "All I have I will sell and give to the poor, and in the robe of a Dominican I will go abroad and preach the Cross."

The others were silent; the Conte glanced down at the fair downcast head of his nephew, who was not much less in years than himself.

"I know what thou thinkest, Giovanni," he said sweetly. "It is that I shall not live to leave this room—much less Florence."

"Ah, Signore!" sighed the boy.

"But it was told me that I should die in the time of lilies," added the Conte, "and that gives me till next spring."

He put great faith in this prophecy, and often quoted it with satisfaction.

"Next spring," he repeated, "I shall see all the blossom trees again, Giovanni, and walk through the valley of the Arno when the flowers are out. God is very good, Giovanni, and I shall be preaching His Word and die a monk."

"Thou hast not the strength," said the younger Mirandola sadly.

"I am stronger to-day," replied the Conte with some eagerness. "Dost thou think that God will permit me to lie here useless till the spring? In a little while I shall be abroad."

His head sank to one side, and the wide lids drooped over his eyes, which were hollow and stained beneath, as if by undried tears.

Andrea locked the press on the last of the manuscripts and heathen authors and came to the fireplace. The air was sharp, and he mended the fire, which had fallen low through the burning of the Conte's profane books, putting on straight logs of orange wood and gnarled roots of olive.

" The Magnifico should send to-day or soon," said the Conte. " Why is there no news? Nor has anything been heard of the ambassadors the Signoria sent to King Charles."

A patriotic feeling for the lovely city of his adoption still possessed the heart of the dying man; he bowed his head to the decree that she must be chastised for her sins, but he did not wish to see her humiliation and downfall before a foreign conqueror; at times the memory of the old sweet days would return, the warm friendship with Lorenzo, the joy of the new learning, the new art, the gaiety and the splendour of the hours spent in the Badia at Fiesole when Ficino expounded the Neoplatonic doctrine of love and loveliness, the days at Camaldoli, at Cafaggiuolo, at Careggi, all the varied beauty of that fair sinful time, and then he would wince at Fra Girolamo's fierce triumph and stern picture of Charles coming to punish the city Lorenzo had loved as Cyrus had come to punish Babylon.

" The Signoria will come to terms," he said, consoling himself. " King Charles will not come as an enemy."

Andrea was silent; he neither was a Florentine nor had he ever loved the Medici, but he hoped the French would not sack the gorgeous city, so pleasant, so enriched with art and learning, so embellished with culture and wealth.

Yet what did these things matter in the eyes of God? Would not His wrath descend and destroy all the jewels of Florence as it had destroyed Babylon and Tyre and the cities of the plain?

Andrea shivered and drew closer over the fragrant smoking logs.

As the bells of San Marco began to sound the Ave Maria a visitor was ushered into the little cabinet where the three young men were silent with their own thoughts.

Giovanni Pico flushed at the sight of the new-comer, who was the Cardinal dei Medici.

It was some time since the Conte had seen any of the Medici; a curious embarrassment constrained him in the presence of the son of Lorenzo.

The younger men rose respectfully and retired to the back of the room; the Cardinal pleasantly invited them to stay.

Standing by the fire, the dawning flames of which illuminated his rich clerical habit, he turned his face smilingly towards the sick man and observed him with a certain keenness, as if trying to detect the conspirator in the enthusiast. Piero had laughed at the idea that Giovanni Pico, his father's beloved friend, would ever intrigue against the Medici, but the Cardinal trusted no one.

"I find you ailing, Conte," he said. "Fra Girolamo has not wrought a miracle and restored you."

"Fra Girolamo pretends to no miracles, Eminence," replied the Conte.

"But he has accomplished one," smiled Giovanni dei Medici. "He has turned the phœnix of learning, the pride of Italy, the philosopher, the prince of all

accomplishments, into the humble Christian ; " and he glanced round the bare room and up at the dark cross and crown of thorn.

" You overrate my vain pretensions to wisdom," replied Mirandola sadly. " And the miracle, if miracle it be, has been accomplished by God, and not by Fra Girolamo."

" But the friar has been a keen instrument in the hands of the Lord," remarked the Cardinal.

Giovanni Pico was silent ; he could not speak of Savonarola to a Medici ; that house and the friar were now utter enemies, and Mirandola felt a certain pang of disloyalty to an old allegiance in his devotion to the Prior of San Marco, though the connection between the noble and the monk was wholly spiritual and in no way touched on things worldly.

The Cardinal too was silent ; his profile was towards Mirandola, who looked at him earnestly.

There were power and courage, ambition and arrogance, and a certain material nobility in the young priest's face ; it was something his father's look, and when the pleasant contours and rich colours of youth had gone, the face, handsome now, would be like Lorenzo's haggard, gaunt-featured, underjawed countenance, at once so plain and so attractive. His hands, the firm, sensitive, refined hands of an aristocrat and an artist, were like those of his father ; he gave Mirandola the impression of power, as Lorenzo had, but to an even greater extent ; he seemed one who would obtain great influence over men ; he might be as tremendous a force in the world as Fra Girolamo, but it would be in a different way ; the prince of the power of the air, not

the angel of God, would be the ally of Giovanni dei Medici in his pleasant progress through the world.

To the sick man looking at him he seemed more than Piero with his frank animalism to typify the power of the world opposed to the power of the spirit as evinced by Savonarola ; Giovanni, more subtle, more intelligent, more gracious, was also more dangerous.

Mirandola felt a chill and strange premonition that this smiling youth, not yet twenty, and five years a Cardinal, represented a potency that would outlast Fra Girolamo and all his works.

" I heard that you were selling your gems, your books, your pictures," said the Medici suddenly. " I have come to know if you will let me be one of your purchasers."

It seemed to the Conte a strange time for the Medici to be buying additions to their collections, already one of the finest in Europe, but he knew that Giovanni had inherited his father's passionate love of the rare and the beautiful.

" Alas, Eminence," he answered, " I did not think my poor things worthy your notice. Many of them have already been sold to Messere Salviati, the master of the Calimala."

Vexation clouded the young Cardinal's smooth brow.

" Have you sold the vase of black basalt that belonged to the Emperor Augustus, and the blue-veined alabaster Scopas ? " he asked.

" I do not know," answered Giovanni in a fatigued voice. " Messere Andrea here has a list of the sales."

" And the seal ring of chalcedony with the dolphins," added the Cardinal, " and the golden chaplet of Etruscan work ? "

Andrea consulted a list which he took from the desk.

"All those are sold, Eminence," he said, "save only the Scopas."

"Bring it to my palace," said the Medici eagerly; "it is as fine a thing as any I have seen."

"What will your Eminence do with it?" asked Mirandola, with a little smile.

"I will set it in my bath-chamber between two small orange trees," replied the Cardinal. "It is a piece I always envied."

The Conte still smiled, a little wistfully; it was not long since he had loved the beautiful statue of Persephone, as it was called, the tall girl binding up her tresses, the exquisite alabaster stained with azure like the white flesh flushed with veins, the close crinkled folds of the Grecian robe bound close under the full breast and falling open over the smooth thigh, and would not have parted with it even for the magnificent sum a genuine Scopas could command.

"I will buy it at any price," added Giovanni dei Medici.

The Conte slightly flushed.

"The things are not to be huckstered, Eminence," he said gently; "the money goes to the needy and the hospitals. Take the Scopas at your own price."

The Cardinal was gracious in his thanks, but in his heart he thought, "My own price will be a low one, Messere, since it is to go into the pocket of that prophesying friar."

"What of the Magnifico?" added Mirandola. "You have had no news?"

"None. Piero is at Pietrasanta or Sarzanello. I

believed he was gone to the French camp, but all news is uncertain."

"The French camp?—to make terms? Surely there was no need of that—Florence is strong enough to defend herself!"

"Not with Savonarola encouraging the people to welcome the French," replied the Medici, with a fierce flash in his eyes, "not with the city seething in revolt, Conte."

"Piero makes terms, then?" murmured Mirandola faintly.

"Naturally," replied the Cardinal cynically, "when one is forsaken by all, one does the best one can for oneself, Signore. This Cyrus is not so terrible—nor," he added, with deeper sarcasm, "this Babylon so wicked, that we may not hope to escape utter destruction by God's good grace."

He glanced at Mirandola's tired, pallid face, and added instantly, "But I weary you. Send me whatever of your treasures are not sold. I will return to-morrow, and hope to find you mended. A good night and happy repose."

Andrea accompanied him to the door. The secretary compared the worldly, magnificent priest with the humble friar, and the contrast troubled him; almost was he persuaded to renounce all and follow Savonarola, but the allure of beauty and joy still moved him, almost shook his resolution when brought close to him, as now in the person of Giovanni dei Medici; more than ever he dreaded to be a witness of that downfall of Florence which Fra Girolamo had prophesied.

The Cardinal proceeded on foot across the Via Larga

to the Medici Palace ; he was glad to leave the atmosphere of sickness and penitence, with which he had little patience, and which depressed him as much as anything could depress his calm, steady spirits.

He had visited Mirandola solely with the object of acquiring some of the treasures of that nobleman's collection, and that object achieved he did not intend to go again.

" I suppose Pico has but a few weeks to live," he thought, " and then all his money will go to San Marco ; " and he thought with vexation of the black basalt vase and the chalcedony ring which had gone to that ardent antiquary the master of the Calimala.

But the remembrance of the alabaster Scopas consoled him ; he smiled to himself, recalling the exquisite features of the Persephone, which reminded him of those of Fiora dei Visdomini.

An atmosphere of unrest and agitation awaited him in the palace ; the feeling of the city was felt to be dangerous to the Medici, and the tension of waiting for news from Piero was becoming great.

In the gilt chamber overlooking the colonnaded courtyard was Guiliano, the youngest son of Lorenzo, and the two Orsini princesses, Clarice and Alfonsina, the mother and wife of Piero.

In the window sat Madonna Fiora, amusing Alfonsina's two little children.

Domina Clarice eagerly asked her son if there were any news.

He smilingly shook his head, and being in no mood for the chatter of women went and shut himself up in his father's gem cabinet.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAILURE OF THE MAGNIFICO

THE gem cabinet was a small long room, the walls of which were entirely occupied with cases which contained the jewels collected by Lorenzo dei Medici and by Piero his son, for the present Magnifico would buy and buy lavishly when he had the money to his hand. Before the large window was a leather-topped table fitted beneath with drawers ; on this stood a lamp of Florentine copper which the Cardinal lit, for in this chamber overlooking the enclosed courtyard it was now nearly dark.

As the flame sprang up it revealed the handsome gilding and carving of the cases and two enamelled terracotta plaques that hung on either wall facing each other between the gem cabinets ; one represented the Archangel Gabriel, the other the Angel Raphael, and both were surrounded by a border of lemon fruit, leaves, and blossoms ; they were two of the finest works of Messere Luca della Robbia, but the Cardinal had never cared for their clear bright colour, their shining surface, the round solidity of the modelling ; he glanced at them now critically, and once again decided that if he were master in the Palazzo Medici he would have them replaced by two of the rich oval paintings by Duccio di Buoninsegna,

glowing yet mellowed by time, which formed the chief glories of the school of Siena.

Opening drawer after drawer and case after case, he took out the treasures and heaped them up on the table; when the table was covered he examined these objects, carefully selecting the most valuable and curious.

His intention was to transport them to one of the country villas or some safer place if it could be found; he had not much trust in Piero either as soldier or statesman, and he did not like the look of things political in Florence.

If the news from the Magnifico was bad, and Giovanni had little hope that it would be good, he thought it quite possible that the Medici and their possessions might be in danger from citizens influenced by Savonarola.

A slightly cynical smile curved his full lips as he recalled a saying of his grandfather's, Cosimo, the founder of the greatness of their house.

"I know these people," the shrewd tyrant had said when reproached for the lavishness with which he was adorning Florence. "In fifty years my family will go; but the buildings will remain, and by them we shall be remembered."

By these things, libraries, palaces, picture-galleries, collections, Giovanni dei Medici meant to be remembered; but his ambitions stretched further than Florence: he was a prince of the Church, and behind him was always Rome.

He turned over his father's treasures with delicate and loving fingers; there were many things there beside gems.

The Cardinal put aside a hanging lamp in chiselled

bronze, of antique workmanship, in the design of a siren riding a marine monster, two covered cups in gold and red from Persia, a large chalice in chiselled silver-gilt with six scenes from the life of Christ and the arms of the Medici in the midst of a wreath of flowers and leaves in coloured enamel set with small jewels, an alabaster Venus on a dolphin, antique but set on a modern stand of carved ebony, a box of streaked agate set with rubies, a perfume case of filigree encrusted with diamonds, a pierced silver pomander garnished with turkis, and a "pace" of ebony on a column of agate, all ornamented with enamelled gold, pearls, rubies, and garnets, in the centre a bas-relief cut in shell of the Virgin and Child, on the top a gold crucifix watched by two pelicans.

He then turned to the gold rings, of which there was a marvellous, perhaps unique collection, rings enamelled black and white and set with brilliants, a ring enamelled all black with a jacinth of six facets, a ring with a rose-red cameo of a head of Mars, another enamelled red and black and set with a dark ruby, another of brilliants clasping a ruby cut with a head of the Virgin, a ring with an octagonal sapphire, enamelled blue and green, a ring with a chimera in chiselled gold, a ring with a black mask and two diamonds for the eyes, antique rings of pure beaten and wrought gold, intaglio and intarsia rings, others set with cameos, and engraved gems showing fauns, nymphs, athletes, emperors, and gods in all deep and glowing colours of violet, gold, crimson, scarlet, white, and orange.

Amidst them was the unset emerald with the unicorn which Piero had offered to the Conte della Mirandola; the Cardinal held this up to the lamplight and was

gazing at the wonderful richness and depth of the colour which seemed to pulse with life, and thinking of the emerald, just such an one as this, which Nero had held before his eyes when lounging in his box at the Coliseum and watching Christians slain, or when being drawn by white gilt-shod mules up the Palatine he gazed down at the temple and columns of the Forum below, when the door was opened and his meditations disturbed. He turned with some vexation, but his frown disappeared when he beheld his mother's waiting-woman, Madonna Fiora dei Visdomini.

He looked at her with the same appreciation with which he had been gazing at the emerald.

She wore a black gown, fine and clinging and bordered with rose colour and gold, and girdled high under the bosom with a filigree belt set with rubies; her sleeves were of transparent puffed lawn, clasped tight at elbow and wrist with bands of gold; her red hair hung over either shoulder in waving tresses, and circled behind her head in plaits; on her forehead hung the *ferroniera*—a ruby on a fine gilt thread. She came softly and silently towards the Cardinal, her gaze fixed on him with a pleading expression.

"Madonna Fiora!" smiled Giovanni dei Medici, putting down the emerald.

"Ah, Signore!" She sighed and came to the table and stood the other side of the lamp, looking down. The Cardinal glanced up at her fair face, which needed no art to enhance the brilliancy of the pale brown eyes, the thick red-gold lashes, the fine red-gold brows on the pure white skin, the cheeks faintly flushed, the soft rose-coloured lips.

"Is it about thy brother again?" asked the Cardinal.

"It is about Carlo," she admitted.

"Tell me thy trouble, little Madonna."

"Alas, it is the debt to the money-lender, Ser Rosario —which the Magnifico guaranteed."

"Piero is in no condition to guarantee anything," remarked the Cardinal dryly, "and never was, my child. Cannot Carlo possibly pay something to this Ser Rosario?"

"Nothing, unless he sell the palazzo and the villa at Fiesole!"

"Did he go to Piero?"

"Yes, Signore."

"And Piero?"

"The Magnifico was unkind and reminded him he had paid his fine and gotten him out of the Stinche, and that I had not, as I promised, induced Madonna Aprilis di Cristofano degli Albizzi to come to Fiesole or Florence. How could I help it if the lady was cold and obstinate?" she added plaintively.

"It is best that thou failed," replied Giovanni. "Let Piero keep to his Venetian street girls," he added, with some contempt.

"But I hate Madonna Arcangela," said Fiora in the same tone of gentle grievance. "She is so ignorant and stupid and greedy, and she stripped the Magnifico of everything."

The Cardinal glanced at the emerald which he had with difficulty saved from the rapacity of the Venetian, and smiled.

"Where is she now?" he asked.

" At Cafaggiuolo, I think—at least she is in hiding, for she is afraid of Domina Alfonsina."

The Cardinal's smile took on an unpleasant expression of cynicism.

" She had better find another lord, for I think she will get no more spoils out of the Medici," he remarked dryly.

" Oh, Signore, what do you mean ? "

" Hast thou not noticed the temper of Florence, my child ? "

Fiora shivered.

" Girolamo Savonarola has the people," added the Medici, with a fierce calm, " ay, as we once held Florence and as one day I will hold Italy. Now is his turn."

" Alas ! " murmured the lady, " how does the Blessed Virgin permit such a man to get such power ? A blasphemer who speaks against Rome and the Holy Father himself ! "

" Ay, Rome," repeated the Cardinal with a flashing look. " There he will overreach himself—in striking Rome he strikes what will turn and rend him and shatter all his work."

" I have never known such times of horror ! " said Madonna Fiora, who had lived but eighteen years and knew no place save Florence. " And what is poor Carlo to do ? " she added, with a deep sigh.

The Cardinal rose.

" Dost thou think I can pay ? " he asked.

Fiora lowered her lids.

" Sweet Madonna, I am penniless," said the young priest. " That necklet of sapphires I gave thee in memory of our last hunt at Careggi took my last *scudi*—

ay, and I had to pay gold for it. I have no more credit in Florence."

Fiora glanced at the heaped-up treasures and jewels, from which the lamplight flashed a thousand colours.

"They are not mine," said the Cardinal, reading her thought.

"But the Magnifico guaranteed the debt," she suggested gently.

"We could not sell these things," returned Giovanni dei Medici. He thought with some remorse of the alabaster Scopas and the other curios he had promised to buy from the Conte della Mirandola; he consoled himself, however, thinking that should the Conte die he would not pay at all, for the money would go to San Marco.

"One of these gems would pay Ser Rosario," murmured Fiora.

But the Cardinal loved the gems as much as he loved the lady—perhaps more; he put a jealous hand over the emerald, which alone was worth eleven thousand crowns.

"They are not mine," he repeated with dignity.

Fiora crept nearer.

"We must have the money," she whispered, "or lose everything we have!"

Tears hung on the golden lashes and her chin trembled.

She came closer still; the lamplight was now behind her, making a halo of her gorgeous hair.

Sheer human distress conquered her refinements and affectations; she suddenly flung her arms round Giovanni dei Medici.

" Oh, Giovanni, gentle Giovanni, help me now ; the man will not wait another day, and we have nowhere to turn ! "

The young man flushed and his eyes sparkled ; from her hair came a scent of distilled white roses, from her clothes a faint perfume of spikenard ; he clasped her close, and she lay, soft and yielding, weeping on his breast.

" Oh, Fiora, what dost thou wish me to do ? " he asked hoarsely.

She continued to sob ; her shoulders heaved gently and her body shuddered.

Giovanni dei Medici kissed the white neck where the red-gold hair was drawn up into the rich coronal of braids.

" Oh, Fiora," he whispered, " I will do anything thou wilt of me ! "

She lifted her face, and they kissed desperately, as if about to separate for ever, then drew trembling apart.

" Where is this man, this money-lender ? " asked the Cardinal.

" He is in the palace now," whispered Fiora, drying her eyes. " He insists on seeing the Magnifico."

" Bring him here," said Giovanni dei Medici. " How much is the debt ? "

" Ten thousand crowns."

" For thee I will do it," he answered, and his dark eyes met hers ardently.

Fiora went softly from the room and the Cardinal turned to his treasures, sadly selecting two of the value of ten thousand crowns.

Only the memory of the scent of white roses from the

locks of Madonna Fiora, and the droop of her head on his breast, and her warm kiss reconciled him to the sacrifice he was making of his brother's treasures. He felt sad, as if the downfall of his house was at hand.

The death of Angelo Poliziano and the approaching death of Pico della Mirandola, both brilliant stars of his father's reign, and their conversion to the doctrines of Savonarola, struck him as a disagreeable omen, as if all the splendid fires of the Medici were to be quenched by the ragged robe of the fanatic friar.

He thought with distrust of Piero, whom he regarded as good for nothing but athletics and games, Guiliano was little more than a boy, their cousins had already joined the King of France, and Piero's children were infants.

"There is no one save I," thought the Cardinal, with a certain melancholy satisfaction, "to uphold the name of Medici."

He could not at present see how to regain the lost hold of the Medici on Florence; it was not in his power to redeem the situation caused by the recklessness and folly of Piero and the growing influence of Savonarola, but he had hope in the future; even if, at the worst, Florence was lost, there was always Rome.

Where a Borgia sat a Medici might be enthroned; it was pleasant to dream of ruling the world from San Pietro, and of seeing kings and emperors at his footstool. He despised the rude use Alessandro made of the papacy; such coarse indulgence was not to his taste.

"If I get the tiara," he thought, "I shall know how to enjoy it. I shall put Florence so tightly under the yoke of the Medici that she will never again escape."

He put apart a cup of agate encircled with a gold serpent and an intaglio ruby ring showing a head of Ceres crowned with corn.

When the money-lender entered, accompanied by Fiora, the Cardinal received him with gracious dignity.

"We hear, Messere," he said, "that you press Carlo dei Visdomini for a matter of ten thousand crowns—an ancient loan."

Ser Rosario looked straightly at the young priest; since the Carnival of San Giovanni he had hated all the Medici.

"An ancient loan indeed, Eminence!" he answered; "it is two years old, and was guaranteed by Signor Piero dei Medici."

The Cardinal smiled.

"A debt that has waited so long might have waited longer and not been urged at a moment when all is confusion in the State," he remarked quietly. "But we understand, Messere, that you are the follower of Fra Girolamo and glad to do a mischief to a friend of our house."

The money-lender coloured with surprise and anger.

"I put forward a just claim, Eminence!" he exclaimed.

"And we made a just observation," returned the Cardinal. "Is it not true that your daughter is married to one of the banished Albizzi, and that your money supplies his intrigues against us?"

Ser Rosario was further bewildered to find that the Cardinal was possessed of this knowledge; he began to feel more respect for Giovanni than he had ever felt for Piero.

" I keep within the law," he murmured ; " and I have good reason not to be friendly to the Medici."

" Had you stepped without the law," replied the priest smoothly, " you would have known it, Messere. We are not fools or asleep, and we still reign in Florence. Put not too much confidence in Cristofano degli Albizzi nor in your raving friar. Both may lead you into danger."

Ser Rosario uneasily fingered the edge of his squirrel-lined robe ; he had no reply.

Giovanni dei Medici took advantage of the moment. " Messere dei Visdomini cannot now pay this sum," he said, " and the Magnifico is not to be troubled with such matters at such a moment ; but that you may have no complaint against us I give you these—worth more than the sum owed you—in return for your quittance of this debt."

And he placed in the thin hands of the money-lender the agate cup and the ring with the intaglio head of Ceres.

It was not without an inward sigh that he did so, but he was rewarded by a warm glance of gratitude from the brilliant eyes of Fiora.

Ser Rosario was shrewd enough to see that the two objects did really exceed the value of his debt, without protest signed the paper the Cardinal set before him, and departed.

Before Fiora could utter her thanks Guiliano dei Medici hastily entered the apartment.

" A messenger from Pietrasanta has galloped by to the Signoria ! " he said, and his gentle face was flushed and agitated.

The Cardinal hastily swept the gems and curios into a drawer, which he locked, than passed into the outer room, followed by his brother and Fiora.

Alfonsina D'Orsini was there in the centre of it, as pale as the pearls on her forehead ; in her black eyes was a look of fear and bitterness ; she had never ceased to bear malice against the Medici for their failure to maintain that splendour which had tempted her to a marriage she considered beneath her rank, and which had brought her no happiness.

The Cardinal at once dispatched a messenger to the Palazzo della Signoria to learn the news ; but the man returned almost immediately.

The messenger from Pietrasanta was shouting his news in the streets as he passed. This same news was the worst possible.

Piero had ceded to France the three famous fortresses of Sarzanello, Sarzana, and Pietrasanta, and the French king was marching unopposed on Florence.

The Cardinal uttered one word—" Poltroon ! "—and swiftly left the Medici palace for his own mansion. In the streets he was assailed with cries of rage, hate, and fury that assured him that Medicean rule in Florence was over.

CHAPTER V

DREAMS

THE weather became stormy as October drew to an end, and the winds were high round Santa Margharita al Montici ; the iron door-bell hanging in the courtyard of the Villa degli Albizzi rang continually in the violent gusts as if invisible hands clamoured for admission to the lonely house.

The birthday of Aprilis was in October ; her father had given her a ring with an intaglio ruby cut with the head of Ceres. Aprilis did not know that it had once been on the finger of Piero dei Medici.

It was too large and heavy for her hand, but the richness of the jewel pleased her, and she sat looking at the sparkle of it in her white palm while she listened to the wind.

The earth was barren now, only the olive trees remained ; the grapes had all been plucked and nothing was left on the vines but yellow leaves ; the air was sharp with the smell of new wine and the odour of the juice-soaked butts ; the pale squeezed grape skins lay outside the peasants' cottages ; wasps, white and black, and numberless small red flies swarmed over everything ; mists full of miasma rose from the direction of the

Maremma ; there was a rumour of fever and plague at Pisa, and at night the nets were drawn closely across the windows to keep out the noxious insects.

Since his return from Milan, Aprilis had only met Cristofano in her father's house, in her father's presence ; she knew that he was deeply involved in the ramifications of the intrigues between Milan, France, and the popular party in Florence, but he never spoke to her of his affairs, nor did she greatly care to know of them ; the central fact was sufficient—he was an enemy of the Medici.

It was the image of Savonarola that haunted her loneliness ; his terrible form was never long absent from her mental vision. Sometimes it attracted, sometimes repelled her ; he had rejected her ; her passionate impulse to leave the world had been treated by him as a mere childish enthusiasm. Aprilis might admit to herself that it was no more ; she was not sure that she would have been able to put the swift resolve into practice, but nevertheless the monk's quiet refusal to take her seriously stung. She felt put aside by all as a useless thing, unnoticed, unwanted.

And so, in the long, warm, windy solitude of the autumn days, the soul of Aprilis longed and suffered and came gradually to know itself.

The peasants, returning from the piazza, where they had taken the vegetables and milk, brought her the news which had shaken Florence—the surrender of Piero and the approach of the French.

At first Aprilis shared the rage of her town against the man who, without a blow, had handed over the great fortresses which had cost the Republic so dear ;

then, despite herself, pity for the lost cause revived her feeling for Piero. She admitted him worthless, but she also admitted that it might be possible to love a worthless man.

A few days after this first news came other; the Magnifico, taking warning from the cold treatment accorded him by the envoys of the Signoria, had returned hastily to Florence, where "every man's hand was against him," the peasant said, for it was found that, besides the three towns, he had promised two hundred thousand crowns to Charles, who was now at Pisa and was advancing through Tuscany, thanks to Piero's concessions, more like a conqueror than a friend or an ally.

"What will happen?" asked Aprilis vaguely.

The peasant replied with simple shrewdness:

"The Medici will be flung out of Florence, Madonna, and swiftly too."

Aprilis thought of the awful words of Savonarola and shuddered. Was he really a prophet, then?

She thought too of Piero—forsaken, scorned, humiliated—and she wondered if Arcangela was still with him; she had heard that his wife and mother had already fled to Poggio à Caiano with Guiliano and the children.

"Poor Piero"—she was no longer angry, but even tender towards him—"he was not born to rule or to do great things."

That day, about the mid hour, Cristofano came up to the villa.

Aprilis was in the dining-room, playing with the toy made by Messere Leonardo da Vinci; she had now learnt to wind it, and she liked to watch its whirring

flight round the room and see it return, click, click, to the place from whence it had started, quivering in the gold and iron body like a live thing.

As Cristofano entered she stood up, colouring with surprise, and the toy buzzed to stillness in her hand ; she wondered why her husband had come, and found herself vexed by the air of elation he showed.

" Thou art more than ever tired of the villa ? " He smiled. " Soon now I shall be able to bring thee into Florence."

He seated himself and looked at her as if he had now time to give her, and leisure in which to consider her as his wife.

She did not answer.

" When the Medici have fallen the decree of banishment will be removed," he added, " and we may live in Florence."

" Will the Medici fall ? " asked Aprilis.

" To-day, in the Signoria, Piero de Capponi proposed that their government should end."

" Why ? " asked Aprilis foolishly.

She was pale, and the hands that held the little metal monster shook.

" Because of the infamous behaviour of the Magnifico," returned Cristofano. " To buy his personal safety from Charles he has sacrificed the choicest possessions of the Republic. Pisa has seized the chance to endeavour to revolt, and the French are coming as enemies to Florence ! "

" What was the Medici to do ? " murmured Aprilis. " He was forsaken, without friends, without money—with all the city turned against him."

Cristofano looked at her sharply.

"Ah, thou speakest for him!" he exclaimed.

"I have a way to speak for those who have no advocates," returned Aprilis sadly.

She stood looking down, and the tears gathered in her eyes.

"Dost thou weep for Florence?" he asked keenly; he rose and came towards her.

Aprilis did not answer; the pale sun, falling through the wind-shaken fig and olive trees and the high window, glowed on her gold hair and faint yellow gown that was starred with little blue flowers; her back was to the light, and her head bent over the toy in her hands, but he could clearly enough see her tears and her pallor.

"For what dost thou weep, Aprilis?" he insisted.

"Is my life such as to make me laugh, Messere?" she answered, without looking up.

He paused, looking at her keenly and thoughtfully, as if he considered the justice of her case.

"Dost thou think that I have been unfair to thee?" he asked at length.

"Unfair?" She was bewildered.

"That I have taken much and given little?" he continued. "Perhaps it is so; alas! it is easy to be unfair to a woman."

"Oh, Signore," she answered, moved at this, "you have done all we asked."

"And I have had thy father's money, Aprilis, and his influence among the merchants of Florence, so that now I, who was nothing, am of some importance in the city."

"That is between my father and you," said Aprilis.

She put the toy on the dark wooden table and turned towards the window.

" And what is between me and thee, Aprilis ? " asked Cristofano.

Her silence was sad.

" I feel remorse towards thee, child," he continued gently.

" Why ? " she said. " Belike I am as happy as I should have been as the Gherardesca's wife. I was foolish, so foolish ! and I have no reason to be anything but grateful to you who saved me from the consequences of that great folly, Signore."

But the thought of what she had dreamt her life would be, and what it was, forced the tears anew from her eyes.

She wondered if it would not have been better to have entered the convent her father had threatened her with on her return from Cafaggiuolo ; after all, she had been reduced to longing for that refuge she had at first shuddered at with such horror and such dread.

" Who is there without folly ? " said Cristofano. He felt himself curiously humbled before her, as if he had wronged her by marrying her ; yet at the time that marriage had seemed a noble action, even if now her humility and her gratitude made him wince. He stood considering what to say, what to do, his smooth handsome face clouded, Florence and the tumults of Florence forgotten for the moment.

Suddenly Aprilis spoke, and startled him beyond measure with her words.

" You are a follower of Fra Girolamo," she said ; " do you truly believe in him—truly believe in God and Christ ? "

She turned her face towards him, and a look of supplication and sorrow, of painful sincerity, blanched her fine features.

"Aprilis, dost thou take me for a heathen?" was all he could stammer.

"I want to know if you believe—*terribly*, as Savonarola believes," she persisted, "in the wrath and destruction coming, in the sin of beauty and love and happiness; if you do—help me!"

"Help thee?"

"Help me to believe too! Convince me, give me a sign, tell me what to do. I wish to be good, I truly wish it—but there is no one to help me—no one."

Cristofano was silent; how could he help her when he followed the prophet without believing in the prophet, when it was not faith nor love of virtue that was inspiring him, but self-centred aims of revenge, ambition, and glory?

"Help me," she repeated earnestly. "Tell me what to do with—with my life—which is so broken—*teach me to believe!*"

"Believe in what, Aprilis?"

"To believe that your prophet is right—that the Medici are children of the devil, and that Florence is but a gay road to perdition."

Her earnestness surprised him into a smile; it was gone instantly, but it had betrayed him; the enthusiastic light faded from the eyes of Aprilis.

"Ah, you do not believe," she said in a shaken voice, "and I talk in vain."

Cristofano tried to redeem his mistake.

"I believe," he answered, "truly I believe in these

things, and in Fra Girolamo—why else am I engaged as I am in supporting this friar? "

"You hate the Medici, but you do not love Savonarola," said Aprilis. "I think you only use him, I think you work for yourself, Signore, as does every other. Nay, you do not believe, and I do not believe—why then do we not enjoy the world untroubled? "

Then, as if afraid of having said too much, she stopped abruptly and asked his pardon for her boldness, but her words were near the truth; Cristofano was becoming less and less of the mind of Pico della Mirandola and Angelo Poliziano, the world was becoming to him more and more interesting, never did he think of renunciation or repentance, follower of Savonarola as he was supposed to be.

His visit to the court of Ludovico Sforza had made him deeper than before in love with knowledge, science, art and loveliness, grace and culture, wisdom and power; he wanted to be a great potentate like the Duke of Milan, not a saint nor a prophet.

He was silent a few seconds, and then he gently answered:

"Thou sayest true, child—why should we not enjoy the world. God did not mean us all to be monks and nuns, chastising ourselves with whips and scourges."

Aprilis sank on to the stiff couch by the window; her eyes shone till they seemed golden, she flung out her arms either side of her, and her bosom heaved quickly under the blue lacings of her bodice.

"Enjoy the world!" she murmured, "do what one wishes and know no remorse! Why not? "

She looked at Cristofano, and he misunderstood her, for she was thinking of another.

"Aprilis," he said, "thou art becoming very dear to me."

She neither flushed nor paled; his wooing came too late.

He came to the couch and stood leaning against the head of it, his arms folded, looking down at her and smiling.

"Wilt thou not truly be my wife?" he added; "can we not that way find the happiness thou speakest of?"

She sat immobile, silent; his handsome face meant nothing to her; the busy thoughts that crowded on her mind were not of Cristofano.

"Aprilis," he urged, with a touch of authority in his tone, "couldst thou not love me?"

"Love! love!" said Aprilis; the word was stale, yet terrible to her, profaned, yet still immaculate, spoilt, yet never known. "What is love? Ah, Signore, what is love?"

"Hast thou not learnt yet, child? Have no dreams told thee?"

"If I go by dreams——" answered Aprilis; she broke off and faintly smiled.

"Tell me."

"Ah, dreams!" she said, and rose in agitation, turning away from Cristofano.

"I too have dreamt, Aprilis." His voice fell pleasantly low, as delicate as a caress. "I have dreamt of fair women—the fair woman, golden as thou art, sweet as thou art—maybe I have in thee found that lady."

Aprilis did not turn towards him; he was too late, he had left her alone too long, nor did his words convince her; she was quick to discern fantasy from passion.

"I am tired," she said, "tired of all things. Only sleep seems good."

He moved a step towards her, so that her shadow was over him.

"The day the Medici are expelled," he said, "I will take thee to Florence—we will have the Albizzi palace again, already I secretly treat for it—wilt thou come?"

"I am your wife, Signore," said Aprilis.

Cristofano flushed.

"Wilt thou come willingly?"

"Ay, willingly," smiled Aprilis.

He had no excuse not to be satisfied, but he was angered; he felt her silent opposition, the way she was enclosed from him, and all that was masterful and arrogant in him rose in antagonism.

"If I come to take my lodging in this house will you give me welcome?" he asked.

"It is your house," said Aprilis; she still smiled at him, but she was of a pitiful pallor.

Cristofano laughed.

"Thou hast been lonely too long," he said; "it has made thee sad. To-night, if things go well in Florence, I will keep thee company at supper, and we will talk further, Aprilis."

She looked at him and bent her head as if she expected a challenge.

He laughed again, and coming up to her, kissed the ends of her long yellow hair.

Aprilis was neither pleased nor angered—what better indeed could she expect than that Cristofano should take her into his favour ?

Yet her heart remained cold, and her thoughts were busier than before with others than Cristofano.

" Kiss me," he said, and now his tone was no longer arrogant, but low and almost humble.

She readily turned her face ; she felt for him a curious remote pity for his absolute ignorance of her and his misunderstanding of what she wished and needed.

He found her lips so cold that he was further angered and abashed, but he never guessed the wild thoughts that were behind her calm.

He had to return immediately to Florence ; he would not stay to share her meal. It seemed to Aprilis that he had only come to tell her of the downfall of the Medici ; she did not accuse him of spite in this, but it further hardened her against him.

She came with him to the gate ; he was returning as he had come, on foot. As they passed down the long avenue from the house to the gate he talked of indifferent topics, of the poor corn crop that year, and how the wind had destroyed the vines on the slope and even uprooted some of the fig trees.

At the gate he said good-bye, taking her hand only and not kissing her again ; he bid her go back to the house at once, as the weather was windy and chilly.

Aprilis assented. She stood between the two cypress trees still unchanged in their sombre darkness, and watched him go down the road towards Florence ; twice he turned and waved his cap ; drawn together in her blue mantle lined with red fox, she made no

response. When the stone walls that edged the winding road hid him from her view, Aprilis turned in the opposite direction and climbed the steep hill towards the church of Santa Margharita.

She meant to be dutiful to her destiny, but under her resignation was rebellion fierce and passionate ; with a longing for help and comfort she was going to look at the beloved city which had once before given her strength.

When she reached the brow of the hill, where the wall sank to a narrow coping over which the bronze-coloured and yellow leaves of the bramble climbed, she paused and gazed down at Florence, now revealed in the valley below.

The autumnal sunshine, troubled with clouds, was flung, half misty, on the roofs of the city and the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore ; the red colour of these was dull, like that of a dead rose, the ribs and lantern of the cupola and the square tower of the Campanile had a bleached look like old ivory, the hills beyond were shadowed, half grey, half purple, the spire of the church at Fiesole showed obscurely.

In the foreground San Miniato rose darkly under a passing cloud, the earth of the hills was golden under the silver olives and the dark richness of the cypresses.

Aprilis sat on the coping, heedless of the wind that came through the trees, blowing her garments about her and filling the air with sound.

Piero dei Medici was somewhere in that city, dishonoured, forsaken—a failure—worthless.

The saint had triumphed, the tyrant fallen—soon Florence would be free of the house against which Savonarola had thundered the wrath of God.

Thinking of Piero, some impulse made Aprilis draw her father's gift from her pocket and gaze at it ; there swept over her the sensation too strong to be dismissed as folly, that it was associated with him.

So strong was the feeling, that she held the ring up to the sunlight, and looked inside the gold circlet.

There, stamped on the gold, in minute design, were the arms of the Medici.

Aprilis flushed, and shuddered as if Piero had touched her, rose to her feet, impelled by irresistible passion, and then checked herself, and stood looking down at Florence through the haze of gold hair the wind blew across her eyes. Presently she turned homewards, the ring with the head of Ceres clutched in her palm.

At the gate she paused, and gazed down the avenue leading to the lonely villa.

To-night Cristofano was coming, but she had yet a few hours of freedom.

Again the blood flushed up into her face ; she put the jewel back into her pocket, and took the road towards Florence.

CHAPTER VI

"PALLE! PALLE!"

APRILIS found Florence in a tumult; she had hardly passed the Porta San Niccolò before she found herself in a crowd through which she could scarcely make way.

During these last weeks Florence had been continually in a ferment, with armed men swarming up and down and groups of citizens gathered on the Piazza, but Aprilis had learnt not to be afraid; for the first time in the history of the passionate city a political crisis, almost a revolution, had occurred without excess or bloodshed.

Piero dei Medici had left the city empty of troops, he had outraged the Republic by his almost incredible surrender of the keys of Tuscany when honourable terms might easily have been obtained, and roused the Signoria and the citizens to indescribable fury.

Yet these people, suddenly released from tyranny, with many ancient and this fresh wrong to avenge, under the fear of foreign invasion and maddened by all manner of vague rumours of terror from the French camp, in this high state of excitement and rage had not committed a single act of violence: no person, no property had been attacked, the houses of the dependents and

favourites of the Medici were undefended yet untouched, no partisan of the fallen house was even insulted in the streets ; the revolution was accomplished within the Council of Seventy in the Palazzo della Signoria by the quiet words of Piero dei Capponi—" It is time to be rid of this baby government."

And this marvellous quiet and control of the people, this reserve and lawfulness, were owing to one influence only—the voice of Savonarola preaching from the Duomo and exhorting Florence to patience, charity, peace, and union.

The voice that had been so sternly lifted against the Medici in the days of their power had no word to say against them in the days of their humiliation ; the man who might, with a few words, have stirred up old grievances, old bitternesses, old hates, and set the liberated people to take their full revenge on those who had oppressed them, used instead his mighty influence to restrain and to soothe, and by his sheer personal power dominated the people into peace. In those days it seemed as if he held Florence in the hollow of his hand, so absolutely did every one turn to him, so completely did all hang upon his words.

For Florence had no other guide, no other leader, no other lodestar save this prophet who had foretold the judgments that were now descending, this monk who had wept and suffered and prayed for Florence, and who alone, in the darkness of her sins, had shone with the pure light of goodness and holiness, those beams from the brow of God. Therefore Aprilis passed unmolested through the press, and though she saw many steel gorgets and helms, many daggers and swords and even

ruder weapons, such as billhooks and staves, she saw no sight of blood or fury.

She reached the Mercato Nuovo, and under pretence of purchasing some nuts and apples gathered the last news of the fallen Prince from the excited vendors and peasants.

Piero that morning had presented himself at the Palazzo della Signoria with an armed and considerable following, but he had been allowed to enter only with one or two in his company, and the Council of Seventy, according him a severe and haughty reception, coldly advised him to dismiss what remained to him of his hired troops, and so avoid a useless struggle.

The Magnifico, utterly confounded by this, had retired in confusion, exclaiming that he would privately consider what to do and then return to the Signoria.

He had then galloped back to the Palazzo Medici, where his brothers awaited the result of his reception by the Signoria.

There he had since remained, and all that was further known of his movements was that he had sent Paolo Orsini with a troop to seize the San Gallo Gate which commanded the Bologna road, and that he would most probably return to the Signoria.

Aprilis gave away her purchases to the children who thronged the columned loggia of the Mercato, and hastily turned in the direction of the Piazza della Signoria.

Here the crowd was denser and more excited; Aprilis heard voices angrily explaining that since Messere Antonio Lorini, a staunch adherent of the Medici, was Podesta for the day (having therefore the sole power

of proposing resolutions to the Council), no motion against the Magnifico was likely to be passed.

"But he will be expelled just the same," added one of the speakers fiercely. "Florence to-day is in no mood to stand on formalities."

And Piero's name was tossed about the crowd and coupled with every term of abuse and scorn and hate.

Aprilis admitted that he deserved them all—she had no excuse for him, even in her heart; he had dishonoured his name, flung away his heritage, lost his chance—failed, failed.

She drew aside on to the steps of the Loggia dei Priori. There were several other women in the crowd, though perhaps none of her quality, and in her modest blue-hooded mantle she passed unnoticed; no one there had the leisure to wonder why a fair young lady was alone in this crowd; for fear of being detected by one of her father's acquaintances she kept the hood well forward over her face.

Suddenly a swift movement shook the multitude; a body of horsemen were seen forcing their way into the Piazza from the Via dei Cazanoli. These were raising the Medici cry of "Palle! palle! palle!" and at their head, steel-clad over red with a cloak of a peacock-blue lined with black fur, rode Piero dei Medici.

He was greeted by a storm of cries which silenced those roused by his own escort.

These shouts: "Down with the 'palle'! Down with the Medici! Liberty! Liberty! Down with the 'palle'!" roared and swelled until Aprilis was deafened and dismayed by the fierceness and the hostility.

Piero, holding his mantle across his face to protect

himself from the stones that began to be thrown, and guiding his rearing horse with one hand, forced his way across the Piazza and dismounted at the " rinogheria."

With an exclamation of wrath that Aprilis could catch even through the tumult, he sprang up the steps and presented himself at the majestic doorway.

But this was already guarded by several members of the Council, notably Messere Luca dei Corsini, Messere Piero dei Capponi, and Messere Jacopo di Tanai de Nerli.

Stepping forward, Capponi barred the entrance of the Magnifico, and in a voice loud enough to be heard by the crowd, who now waited in an expectant silence, declared that the Prince could only be admitted, alone and unarmed, by the little postern gate.

Shouts of applause and derision greeted these words, and triumphant insults were heaped on the Magnifico, who turned away from the palace doors, white with fury, and his hand on his sword.

He had not left the steps, however, before he was called by Messere Antonio Lorini, the Podesta, and the one remaining member of the Council still faithful to the Medici, who bade him return. He had done one good service that day to the fallen house, for having the charge of the tower keys he had refused to deliver them, and thereby had prevented the great alarm bells from being rung to summon the people.

He was now powerless, however, to further help the Medici ; when Piero, in answer to his invitation, again presented himself at the door, Capponi and Nerli again both barred his way.

Piero drew his sword and arrogantly strove to make his way by force.

But young Jacopo de Nerli, crying in a tone of insult, " It is well for thee to draw thy sword on the citizens of Florence, who delivered three fortresses without a blow ! " shut the door in his face.

The Magnifico, assailed on all sides, and now hopelessly excluded from the Palazzo, came down the steps and mounted, sheathing his sword, then unsheathing it again as the cries against him became louder and more scornful.

Several of the citizens wagged the tips of their long hoods at him, and the very street boys shouted, thrusting out their under lips.

Among the few men on horseback who were encouraging the mob and insulting the Magnifico, Aprilis suddenly recognized, in two newcomers, Cristofano and Astorre della Gherardesca, both fully armed. Unable to endure the sight of Piero retreating with the mob at his heels, and these two enemies who were making him drink the dregs of utter humiliation, Aprilis made her way from the Loggia dei Priori, and turning down a quieter street, gained her father's house by a back way.

Ser Rosario was out—he had hastened to his counting-house to see that his treasures were safely put out of reach of the mob ; Monna Lucia was in bed with the rheumatism, and Monna Costanza was away on a visit.

Aprilis had the house to herself ; feigning that she had not known of the state of affairs in Florence, and giving some trivial reason for her unexpected arrival, she asked for food, for it was now long past midday, and she had not eaten.

When she had finished her hasty meal she went on

to the loggia from which she had first seen Piero, and listened to the rioting in the streets.

One of the servants returning from making purchases in the Mercato Vecchio, said that there had been a fight in the Piazza San Giovanni between the people and the Bargello, Messere Piero Antonio dell' Aquila, who, meeting the Magnifico as he was retreating towards the Via Larga, had attempted to give him assistance.

He had, however, been overpowered, disarmed, and being led to his palace, was compelled to release his prisoners. The crowd, armed with the weapons they had just seized, then hurried to the other great prison, the Stinche, but before they could reach it the news was spread abroad that Messere Francesco Valori, one of the first embassy from Florence to the French, had returned with news.

" And when I came back, Madonna," added the man, " there was every one rushing to the Piazza, and I could hardly keep my feet against them. God help us all ! "

" And the Magnifico ? " asked Aprilis.

" It is no more than Messere dei Medici now, Madonna ; and there are few give him so civil a title as that. He has gotten back to his house, where the Cardinal is. They said he was recalling his troops from the San Gallo Gate and meant to make an effort to force his way into the Palazzo della Signoria."

" But he—he cannot succeed ! " stammered Aprilis ; " there is no hope for him at all, is there ? "

The servant answered her with the ready and mischievous smile of the Florentine :

" Why, he has hardly any men at all, Madonna ; half

of those he had with him this morning have already deserted him."

" What will he do ? "

" Perhaps he will go to Careggi, where Madonna Alfonsina is, or hide in the Casentino, or make for Bologna."

" Ah yes," said Aprilis, " the Bentivoglio was always his friend."

" Or he might go to Rome, Madonna ; he will always have a good welcome in Rome, from the Orsini or the Pope."

" Yes, yes," agreed Aprilis ; then she started and stood at attention.

Across the city pealed the great bell of the Signoria, sounding the note of alarm and summoning the citizens to the Piazza.

" Go also and hear what the news is ! " cried Aprilis to the servant, and the man eagerly ran off on his errand.

Aprilis stood motionless in the loggia, every stroke of the bell shaking her heart to the core.

A tumult was now gathering in the Via Larga ; a cavalcade was issuing from the Palazzo Medici ; in a few minutes it swept past the house of Ser Rosario towards the Piazza San Marco and the Medici gardens, raising cries of " Palle ! palle ! " the cries that had once been so potent to raise Florence in arms for their sovereign.

Aprilis had thought it was Piero, but she could not see the peacock mantle ; the little band was headed by the Cardinal and Carlo dei Visdomini, who were making a desperate effort to rouse the town on behalf of the Magnifico.

But no one responded to the war shout, and the

young priest was threatened from the streets and from the windows with cries and stones and the flash of more dangerous weapons.

"He at least has courage," thought Aprilis; she wondered if even that elementary virtue could be accorded Piero.

The Cardinal had hardly passed before Ser Rosario's servant returned; his report was that Messere Francesco Valori had further inflamed the populace by his account of Piero's behaviour at the French camp and the various concessions to Charles that had been to the injury and disgrace of Florence, and that this Messere Francesco Valori, mounted on the same mule with which he had entered Florence, and still covered with the dust of the road, was now leading the infuriated people against the Palazzo Medici.

"But Messere Francesco Valori is a follower of Fra Girolamo, and Fra Girolamo preaches peace!" cried Aprilis.

"Fra Girolamo is not here to control the people, Madonna," replied the servant.

The rest of the household had now gathered in the loggia and were eagerly watching the events in the Via Larga.

"Was my lord with Messere Valori?" asked Aprilis of her messenger.

"Yes, Madonna, I saw Messere degli Albizzi and Messere della Gherardesca."

An excited passer-by shouted up to the loggia that the Signoria had passed a decree proscribing the Medici as rebels, and that this had been delivered at the Palazzo Medici.

Soon after Piero himself dashed by, accompanied by a few followers ; they rode towards San Marco, their intention being to rouse the inhabitants of the Borgo San Gallo, who had always been intensely devoted to the Medici.

On learning this from the clamour of the passing crowd, Aprilis left the loggia, went to the deserted stables, took out her little white mule she kept there saddled, and mounted him and rode out of the Palazzo Fiorivanti by the back way.

" I am going to my father," she said to the one servant who saw her and endeavoured to remonstrate with her for going abroad on such a day.

But it was not towards Ser Rosario's counting-house in the Via Calimala she turned, but towards the Porta Prato.

This part of the town was fairly deserted, the streets were empty in the afternoon sun, but a little crowd of the baser sort were gathered round the gate itself. The centre of their attention was a small carriage from which a young man and a lady had descended ; both were alternately pleading and threatening the people, who were disposed to handle them roughly, and were engaged in emptying the carriage of its baggage, which seemed to contain considerable valuables.

Indeed, these rolls of tapestries, cases of gold and silver objects, caskets of jewels and chests of rich dresses scattered out on the dusty road, so attracted the attention of Aprilis that she looked curiously at the couple who had been stopped and despoiled. The man was unknown to her, but in the weeping, scolding woman she recognized the fair Venetian, Arcangela.

With a smiling glance at the heap of treasure, obviously the spoils of the Medici villa hastily snatched together at the first alarm, Aprilis passed through the Porta Prato.

She then put her mule to the trot, and skirting the walls, turned in the direction of the Porta San Gallo.

CHAPTER VII

THE DOLOROUS VIRGIN

Piero dei Medici, aided by his brother Guiliano and his Chancellor, Piero Dorizzi di Bibbiena, and supported by a few of his hired soldiers, continued the unequal struggle at the Porta San Gallo.

The Magnifico was now reduced to the last extreme ; the city was practically lost, and he knew it ; but he was making a despairing attempt to rouse the miserable inhabitants of the Borgo San Gallo, who had always been devoted to his house.

But hatred of the man who had betrayed Florence was stronger even among these humble wretches than the traditional awe and respect due to the Medici.

The shouts of " Palle ! palle ! " Bibbiena endeavoured to raise were drowned in hoots and hisses of contempt.

Piero galloped his horse up and down the narrow streets alternately entreating and threatening the ragged crowd, who answered by mockery.

He had, in his last desperate moments in the Palazzo Medici, snatched up some gold and jewels, with which his pockets were full ; now, as a last resource, he began scattering the ducats and the gems in the filthy streets,

where the half-naked children ran among the mouldering refuse.

But the gold lay untouched, and one woman picked up a jewel from a miserable window-sill, and flung it back in the face of the Medici.

" Is this part of the price thou hadst for the three towns ? " she shrieked.

Piero flung up his arm to shield his face.

" Follow me to the Palazzo della Signoria ! " he shouted. " Arm yourselves and follow me ! You see that I can pay !—follow me ! "

He was answered by a burly vintner with a wine-stained, leathern apron, who leant from the window of his *trattoria*.

" Follow thee ! What use art thou to lead men ? Follow thee to see thee play *pallone* in the Piazza Santa Croce or race horses along the Arno ? "

A hoarse shout of approval came from the fellows gathered about the speaker, and one of them added :

" Get thee from Florence, Medici ! thy day is over ! Get thee to the French again, who will feed thee ! The Florentines have no more sugar for thy sucking ! "

Piero had now flung away his last piece of gold ; several of his soldiers, seeing how hopeless his situation was, had deserted him and ridden back to the centre of the city to join Valori's men, who were attacking the Palazzo dei Medici ; few and miserable indeed were those who still raised the feeble cry of " Palle ! palle ! "

And a fiercer movement shook the crowd : dregs and miserable as they were, the sight of the man who had lowered the Republic in the dust before the foreigner seemed to rouse them to a fury of scorn.

" How long wilt thou stay here ? " they shouted, and several of them made a rush at the Magnifico with snatched up knives and other weapons ; a stone struck Guiliano on the sword arm, disabling him, and the Chancellor was pulled from his horse and roughly handled.

Piero now saw that all was over, and that the splendid heritage his father had left him, the princedom of the foremost state in Christendom, an unprecedented popularity, a name one of the most glorious in the world, was lost for ever.

An agony of shame and remorse shook his remaining strength.

There was nothing to save now but his life, and unless he was prepared to die by the hands of the lowest of those over whom he had tyrannized, he must abandon the city.

Shielding his face with the corner of his mantle he set his spurs and fled through the gate, pursued by the insults and jeers of the mob at his heels, struck by handfuls of dirt and foul rubbish, and followed by the shrill, scornful laughter of women and children.

Guiliano, Bibbiena, and a handful of soldiers dashed after him.

They had not gone more than a few paces before an ominous sound caused Piero to look back. He ground his teeth together as he saw the gates being closed.

" They shall open them ! " he muttered. " The day will come when they shall open to me ! "

But in his heart he felt that he had left Florence for the last time.

Guiliano rode by his side, weeping. Piero, scowling

at him, commanded silence, but the boy's tears continued to flow, not so much for the pain of his arm as for the lost city of his father, which he had truly loved.

By the time they had reached the hills rising to Pratolino nearly all the soldiers, fearful of being attacked by the peasants, had deserted.

Piero had tried to bribe them, but they had laughed, pointing to his empty pockets as they rode away in the direction of Florence.

At Pratolino, Bibbiena produced a few ducats and tried to get food and attention for their wounds, for the Magnifico had received a cut on the head in the tumult. Guiliano could not lift his right arm, and the Chancellor himself was aching with bruises.

Pratolino, near to the villas of the Medici, knew the Magnifico well, and many of the inhabitants were in his employ ; the fugitives confidently hoped therefore for assistance and sympathy.

But these men were Tuscans, some of them even Florentines, and they refused all help fiercely and disdainfully.

Piero, stung beyond endurance, replied by arrogant words, and even used his whip on the innkeeper who denied them food.

In an instant the little town was in a tumult, the little band of exiles were fiercely attacked, and the Magnifico, his sword beaten out of his hand, was driven out of Pratolino along the Bologna road by a crowd of peasants armed with billhooks, shears, and reaping knives.

He galloped until he had outdistanced them, and

exhausted his horse; then, slowing his pace, he miserably considered the position in which he found himself.

None of his companions appeared in sight, and he had to conclude that they had fled by another way; finding himself utterly alone, a terror of being found and slain seized him, he gazed with dismay and fear at the beautiful familiar country, and listened painfully to the deep stillness.

He was still only a few miles outside Florence—from the hills on his right, the city could be seen, gorgeous in the valley.

As he recalled that view of Florence which he had often carelessly noted when hunting or hawking in the wild woods round the sanctuary of Monte Senario, the tears stung his eyes; he thought of San Lorenzo, where his father lay buried behind the palace where he had lived, and he shuddered as if he saw the dead face of the man whose life-work he had undone looking at him with dreadful reproach and scorn.

Lorenzo had died without the absolution of Fra Girolamo rather than give up Florence, and his son had flung away the city in a few moments of fear and folly.

Slowly and aimlessly Piero rode along the lonely road; penniless, proscribed, pursued, he knew not where to direct his steps.

Rome, where were his wife's and mother's people, the Orsini princes, and where the Pope would protect him, must be his ultimate destination, but he knew not how to get to Rome.

In his uncertainty he returned to his original idea of making his way to Bologna, though he shuddered at

the thought of presenting himself in this pitiful guise before the haughty and splendid Bentivoglio, lord of that city.

He thought of his wife at Careggi, and wondered if she had yet fled to Rome—he felt no particular interest in her fate, nor in that of his two children ; with more emotion he recalled Arcangela the Venetian whom he had loaded with benefits, and who had come to the Palazzo in the Via Larga that morning and swept off all she could lay hands on, then left with one of his equerries under his very eyes, laughing at him.

Recalling this woman for whom he had written so many sentimental verses, and whom he had clothed in silk, clasped in gold, and fed on peaches in the winter, he felt a strong desire to have her before him now, that he might strangle her with his horse collar.

His dismal thoughts travelled from one phase of his misfortunes to another, and he wondered what had happened to the Cardinal and Carlo dei Visdomini, for whose return he had not waited—had they been captured or even slain fighting in the streets ?

The idea of this filled him with rage and hatred against Florence ; he vowed that if he ever returned to the city he would take a revenge on Savonarola and his followers (whom he looked upon as the prime authors of his discomfiture) worse than that terrible vengeance on the Pazzi which had troubled Lorenzo on his deathbed.

He felt for his sword to register this vow on the cross, and when his hand touched the empty scabbard and he remembered that he had been disarmed by the peasants of Pratolino the coldness of despair touched his heart.

Dismounting from his horse he sat down by the road-

side on the bare winter bank, and sinking his face, stained by the dried blood from the cut on his head, into his hands, the Magnifico wept. It was thus Aprilis, coming up on her stout little mule, found him.

She had been outside the San Gallo Gate when the Mediceans were expelled ; she had, after a little while, followed them up to Pratolino, and there had learnt of their further disaster, and then she had hastened along the Bologna road, which she was told was that taken by the Magnifico.

And there she found him, forlorn by the wayside, no longer splendid, no longer haughty, no longer a tyrant, no longer to be feared, but a humiliated, outcast, ruined, and weary man.

Aprilis dismounted and fastened the little mule to the stump of an olive tree near to Piero's untethered horse.

He had looked up at the first sound of her approach and was staring at her blankly.

Aprilis gazed desperately at that face she had first seen the night of the Carnival when he had taken off the wolf-mask to smile at her : changed, soiled as it was now, the essentials had not been altered—handsome, sensual still wer the lines ; haughty, selfish the expression.

Misfortune had neither purified nor strengthened ; he had taken his downfall with bewilderment and rage like a great animal suddenly overcome by a strength greater than his own.

Aprilis saw this in his staring look at her, and all her feeling for him was roused by it into an almost unbearable passion.

She came towards him with outstretched hands.

" Magnifico ! Magnifico ! They are looking for you—

bands of peasants are searching for you round Pratolino and Olmo ! "

He gazed at her confusedly.

" Aprilis," he muttered. " Have you come after me —alone, Aprilis ? "

" Yes," she said. She stopped before him ; the low afternoon sun crept under her hood and showed her tired face.

Piero recalled that she was the wife of the man who had been encouraging the mob to insult and attack him in the Piazza della Signoria, and this brought a smile to his lips.

" Then I am not utterly forsaken," he said, and lifted his head higher.

" You cannot stay here." Aprilis was looking anxiously back along the road which she had come. " They are searching for you——"

Piero rose, staggering with fatigue ; he wondered desperately if he should escape by Olmo, the Madonna del Sasso, into the Casentino country, and hide there among the rocks and woods, wild valleys and great hills, but he was not sure whether the Conti Guidi who ruled that country were favourable to him, and if even at La Verna, Poppi, Pratovecchio, or Pomena he might find an asylum.

" What shall I do, child ? " he asked, turning helplessly to the girl. " Tell me what I shall do ? "

Aprilis drew her level brows together.

" Are we not near Cafaggiuolo ? " she said. " Cannot you hide there, in your villa, till night falls ? "

He found her suggestion feasible ; probably his house had been deserted, but he was certain of shelter, possibly

of food, and the distance was only the matter of a few miles.

"Will you come with me?" he asked.

"Now I will come with you," she answered. "Now, Magnifico, now."

They mounted and rode rapidly towards the villa that was so strange a memory for Aprilis. Piero took the shorter way across the fields, and they passed no one save a few peasants gathering sticks, who merely stared; it seemed as if the news from Florence had not yet reached so far.

When they gained the villa they found it abandoned; the iron gates stood open and there was no one about. The house itself was closed at every entrance and Piero was at a loss.

Aprilis dismounted. She looked up at the building that had held her prisoner that June night, at the very window from behind which she had gazed at the empty, fair prospect, where she had rested her head against the mullions and waited for the coming of the wolf-mask.

"The secret door," she said. "Where is the secret door?" and from the pocket of her gown she took out the silver key and put it in the brown hand of the Medici.

He recognized the pass-key of the secret passages at Cafaggiuolo, and stared at her stupidly.

"I have always kept it," smiled Aprilis. "I always take it with me—also the dagger."

"I wonder if you make a mock of me," he said, frowning a little.

He turned the horse and mule into the field at the side of the villa, and Aprilis followed him to the little postern

door from which Cristofano had escaped, and together they ascended the dark concealed stairs that led to the apartments of the Cardinal.

Entering the room where Cristofano had been imprisoned, they passed into the library and then into the outer chamber, the one first entered by Aprilis.

There they turned and stared at each other, both pale, both haggard, like two creatures bewildered.

Then he took her in his arms, very gently, and kissed her again and again, calling her his love, his saviour, his light.

Aprilis felt his tears on her cheek and his heart beating beneath her own ; she lay against his breast quietly, her eyes were closed, her ears straining to catch his broken endearments.

At last she softly withdrew herself.

" Thou art hungry and tired," she said, " and to-night thou must ride to Bologna."

" Never heed for me," answered Piero ; " thou art weary, and for my sake."

He gazed at her almost with reverence, and indeed there seemed to him something divine in this woman who had withstood him in his splendour and now came to him in his utter ruin.

He left her to see what he could find in the house, and Aprilis sat down on the couch that she had last seen with Arcangela reclining amongst the cushions. She recalled the Venetian endeavouring to escape with her spoils and her lover, and her shrieking fury when she was stopped and in her turn despoiled by the mob at the Porta Prato.

Aprilis looked round the room and shuddered ; it

seemed dreary now, very different from the time when she had been so moved by the splendour of the furnishings.

Many of the small and costlier objects had gone ; it was evidently long since a fire had been lit, and the air was chilly. Aprilis looked from the window ; the prospect was different now, all the luxurious trees were bare save the dark and funereal cypresses and yews about the gate.

She wondered what Cristofano was doing, probably helping to sack the Palazzo Medici ; and to-night, flushed with triumph, he would come up to the Albizzi villa expecting her welcome. . . .

And she—she had chosen, and there could be now no hesitancy. She felt as if she would die if forced to leave Piero now ; she had become his, one with his misfortunes and ruin.

She, who had wanted to be a nun, who had abased herself in tears at the feet of Savonarola. She winced at the thought of the dreadful monk. " Go back and learn from your husband," he had told her ; " women are subject to their husbands as men are subject unto God." He would consider her accursed now.

Aprilis formed no excuse for herself and none for Piero ; by no reasoning could she justify her action nor his ; they were both fugitives, cowards, people who had run away from their duty, people who had been tested and who had failed.

And if Fra Girolamo was God's true prophet there was nothing but hell-fire for both of them.

" But I do not believe," said Aprilis. " Cristofano himself does not believe. ' Let us enjoy the world,' he said."

She rose restlessly, and as she moved her glance caught a little painting hanging over the door into the library; she had not before noticed this, but now a shaft of late sunlight was clearly showing every detail of the picture.

It was a fine work by some early master representing the dolorous Virgin wearing a heavy gilt crown and gazing upwards with eyes red with tears, while seven swords were thrust into her heart.

Aprilis trembled before this picture and all the thoughts and memories it awakened; the sad face seemed to rebuke her, to recall that terrible day in the Duomo when she had bent before the awful words of Savonarola. She heard the step of Piero without, and, quickly mounting a chair, turned the dolorous Virgin with her face to the wall.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RETURN

Piero had found some wine and a little stale bread, nothing more; the villa had been thoroughly spoiled before being deserted. The Magnifico called God's curses on his servants, heedless of the fact that he too had fled from his post at the first sight of danger.

But Aprilis remembered this, remembered that she too had forsaken her place.

The Magnifico had washed his wound, but it was bleeding afresh, and Aprilis bound it up with some strips of linen from his torn shirt.

He had taken his armour off and wore the peacock mantle over his crimson underhabit; Aprilis too kept her cloak on, for as the sun sank it became more and more chilly in the deserted apartment of the Cardinal.

They spoke very little. Piero cut the bread with the only weapon remaining to him, a short dagger or knife, and poured the wine into a common horn cup he had found in the kitchen; in silence they ate and drank, Aprilis to keep him company, for she had eaten at midday in her father's house, but Piero because he was hungry, for he had had no moment in which to take food since his return from the French camp that morning.

And what Aprilis left he took also, so that there was not a crumb of the coarse wheaten loaf remaining; every drop of the wine he drained, then put his face in his hands, sitting huddled in the rich, low chair.

Aprilis took from her pocket the ruby ring with the head of Ceres.

"Dost thou know this?" she asked, holding it out on her palm.

He looked up.

"My father's ring!" He took it curiously. "Why, this should never have been sold."

"I knew that it was thine," said Aprilis. "My father gave it to me for a birthday gift."

"Giovanni sold it," answered Piero; "certainly he sold it. I wonder if he took the emerald unicorn." He grasped the hand she held out for the return of the ring, and grasped it tight. "Strange this jewel should come to thee—tell me what wilt thou do with a man ruined and abashed, Aprilis?"

She slipped from the couch to her knees before him, still leaving her slender fingers in his powerful hand.

"I too am ruined and abashed, and have been since I came before to Cafaggiuolo."

He struck his breast with his other hand and shook his head sadly.

"My fault—my great fault!"

"Not wholly thine, Magnifico," answered Aprilis gently.

"Magnifico no longer; that title hath a ring of mockery now—thou wouldst not mock me as the others do, Aprilis?"

" I would serve thee—to the end, Piero."

He looked at her almost startled.

" Never before have I met a woman like thee ! " he exclaimed. " Why dost thou leave all for me now when I have lost everything ? "

Aprilis bent her head and was silent.

" Why didst thou not come to San Miniato when I was waiting for thee ? Why didst thou escape into Florence that day and go into the Duomo to hear the frenzied friar preach ? "

She trembled.

" How can I tell to thee the history of my soul ? " she murmured.

" Thy soul ! " he wondered. " How does this touch thy soul ? "

Aprilis glanced up and smiled.

" Hast thou no soul, Magnifico ? "

" Ay, and I will save it yet—have thou no fear of that. I am a great sinner, but I will die penitent."

" Thou hast no soul," she said. " Thou art no better than the pagan fauns that still linger in Careggi woods."

" Hast thou seen them ? " he asked curiously.

" Nay, but others have. They are little better than devils, Magnifico."

" Piero—call me Piero ! Give me my name in love, Aprilis."

" Piero, then, in love I give it thee ! Yea, I do pity and love thee ! Ah, now God has turned His face away, but I do love thee, unfortunate as thou art ! "

He freed her hand and took her face between his palms with great tenderness.

" Thou art an angel " he said brokenly, " a holy

creature. My father will look down and bless thee for bringing me this comfort now."

And he looked at her with sincere reverence.

"It is wrong," answered Aprilis. "I am worthless—I have left my father and my husband——"

"Thy husband?" he interrupted jealously; "what is he to thee?"

"Have I not left him? Have I seen him save in my father's house? But to-night he comes home—to his house and my welcome. And I owe him all gratitude—yet I have come to thee."

"And I will love thee," cried Piero, "as no Albizzi could—and I will put thee next the Madonna in my heart and worship thee incessantly."

She drew her face from his hands and hid it with her own.

"Aprilis, from the first I loved thee when I saw thee on the loggia, when I spoke with thee in the Medici gardens, on my faith I loved thee then!"

She knew that this was not so, that when he came the second night to Cafaggiuolo he had forgotten her, yet his words were sweet in her ears, and probably he believed he was speaking the truth; she knew at least he used the word "love" loosely, and perhaps was unaware of its value. She rose and went to the window—the sun was setting in cloudless gold, the dark cypress showed black in a landscape flooded with pellucid light; glory and loveliness rested on the land.

Piero followed her; he clung passionately to this love and devotion that had been offered him in the hour of his humiliation, that restored to him his pride, his courage, his confidence.

This woman, so delicate, so fair, who had been so elusive and so cold, seemed to him indeed an angel sent to comfort him in his distresses.

"Wilt thou come with me to Bologna?" he asked. She looked at him sadly.

"Where thou wilt. But what shall I do in Bologna? And who will harbour me?"

"Come then to the Casentino—the Conti Guidi will shelter us——"

Aprilis interrupted.

"Wilt thou not re-enter Florence, Piero?"

"By my father's soul, I will."

"Then do not hide like a thief in the Casentino, but go to Rome and appeal to the Pope against the Florentines."

"It is reason. The Borgia will put down the raving monk. Yet my soul sickens at politics."

"Poor wretch," smiled Aprilis. "Thou hast no wisdom for such matters. Thou wilt never succeed, Piero—we are alike, what we touch we spoil."

"With thee beside me I might do much—thou shalt be my angel and my oracle."

"Believe not that." She spoke firmly, but tears welled to her eyes. "There is no golden future for us, we shall but drag each other down."

"Why dost thou speak so sadly, Aprilis?"

"O love, I would not that thou deceive thyself. When did two weaknesses make one strength? Enough I love thee; take that—I have no more to give."

"Ay, child, it is enough; and thou wilt come with me to Rome?"

"Should I be abashed before the Borgia's court?"

she asked. "But to avoid scandal and save my husband's name I will get a male habit and go as your horse-boy or your page."

Piero took her in his arms, pushed back her hood and kissed the waving golden hair; the tears were in his eyes too, tears of fatigue and sadness.

"We should start," he said.

"Not until it is dark," she answered; "and it is best that thou shouldst sleep a little first. I will keep watch."

He let her lead him to the couch; in truth, he was very weary, having scarcely slept since these troubles had begun.

"Hold thou my hand," he said, and kissing her again and making the sign of benediction over her head he stretched himself out with a sigh of fatigue.

The silk cushions against which Arcangela had reclined supported his head; he turned his head towards Aprilis smiling.

"I shall not sleep," he said, "only rest a little."

She drew the low chair to the side of the couch and took his hand in hers; for a few moments he kept his eyes on her face, earnestly and with a certain wistfulness, then the heavy lids drooped, and he slept.

As soon as he had fallen completely asleep Aprilis was conscious of a great loneliness; his slumber oppressed her almost like the presence of death.

She became acutely conscious of the great size and emptiness of the house, of the isolation of the situation and all the misfortunes that had that day culminated. Yet it was not these misfortunes that oppressed, but a vague and horrible sense of doom and punishment

which seemed to threaten from the very atmosphere of the darkening room.

She looked with terror at the sinking sun now casting the last rays through the square unshaded window, and then glanced round for a light; some half-burnt candles and a lamp stood on a table within the door, and this reassured her courage.

To-night she dreaded the dark.

She turned her gaze on the sleeping man; with passionate tenderness she marked every line of his face, the low forehead, the dark red curls disfigured by the bandage, the sweeping brows and long lashes, the aquiline nose, the full lips and nostrils, the haughty chin, and then the powerful lines of the thick neck, and the great arch of the chest.

Worthless, evil, wicked—he was execrated as all these, nor could she formulate any defence for him, but now his dark, flushed countenance, relaxed in deep slumber, had no look of wickedness.

It was rather expressionless, like the face of a child. Not a single wrinkle or furrow betrayed sin or passion, the clear skin was as smooth as the bronze mask of a faun by Scopas she had once seen brought as pledge to her father's office.

The face of that faun reminded her of the Medici; both seemed creatures knowing neither good nor evil, seeking only happiness—useless and soulless. She looked at the hand which lay on her lap, strong brown fingers, a firm wrist—his right hand, one that had proved worthless alike with the sword and the pen of statecraft.

A hand that had never done anything more worthy

than guide a horse, toss a ball, or caress a woman. A hand that would never do anything more worthy, Aprilis was sure.

"Yet I do love thee, dear," she whispered. "I do love thee."

Her whole body trembled with happiness at the thought of being always near him, of serving him, of comforting him.

She tried to picture her future life, but it was so strange a prospect that she could form no conception of it; his image filled the future, there was nothing else.

As the dusk gathered her loneliness increased; she wished he would wake, but he never even stirred in his slumber. Her position became cramped; she gently placed his hand near the other on his breast and rose, stretching her stiff limbs.

As she did so she glanced unwittingly above the door leading into the library.

The picture of the dolorous Virgin was again hanging with the face to the room.

Utter terror seized Aprilis; she was sure that she had turned the painting round, sure that no one else had touched it; she stood motionless, and drops of horror dewed her forehead.

Then she tried to reason with herself; she had handled the picture hastily, the wire on which it was hung had twisted back into place, the panel was light and it was quite possible that they, absorbed in each other, had not heard the sound.

Yet her terror remained; love and passion died before the approach of a great fear; she stood cold to her

finger-tips and stared at the grieving face of the Madonna showing pale through the twilight.

" Oh, Maria, what am I about to do ! " she muttered. " Oh, I am a great sinner ! "

Then with a shock it rushed upon her. " After all, I *do* believe ! "

" In goodness, in wickedness, in God, in His angels and His judgments, in heaven and in hell-fire ! "

She went on her knees as if struck down by a blow—the dreadful words of Savonarola seemed to ring out of the gathering darkness—

" Vengeance shall rush forth like the water, and judgment like the tempest ! "

And was not she one of those whom flood and storm would overtake ?

" I am forsaking city, father, husband, duty, honour, for wanton love of a godless man ! Can I do it ? Can I ? Nay, I am afraid, afraid ! "

She crouched there, staring up at the Madonna ; for a worthless tyrant whom she had herself despised she was going to inflict pain and dishonour on others and lose her own soul.

She started to her feet, stumbling in her long robe ; but Piero dei Medici did not stir.

With trembling steps, as if one stood with a whip behind her, she came to his side and took the silver key from the flat pocket where he had carelessly dropped it ; for a full moment she gazed down at his sleeping face that the encroaching shadows were fast hiding from her eyes.

" Love, love," she whispered, and bent as if to kiss him ; but her lips did not touch his.

Then she left him, quitting the villa by the secret door by which they had entered.

As she stepped into the garden she saw a group of men coming through the cypress trees ; as they advanced she recognized the Magnifico's chancellor and Guiliano dei Medici among the foremost.

Holding her hood across her face, though she was aware neither of them knew her, she approached them.

" Piero dei Medici is upstairs in the apartments of the Cardinal," she said, and gave them the silver key.

Guiliano took it in amazement.

" I thought," he said, " we might find him here—but you, Madonna ? "

Aprilis gave him no answer ; she could not speak, the tears were running down her face, and every nerve ached with agony.

Slipping away through the shadows she found the little mule, mounted and rode out of the gates. She did not know if it were fancy or reality that a voice seemed to follow her from the deserted villa—

" Aprilis ! Aprilis ! why hast thou loosed my hand ? Why hast thou left me ? "

Faster rode Aprilis down the Florence road, faster the tears chased down her cheeks, but she never looked back, and through her distorted lips she kept murmuring—" Maria, save me ! Christ, save me ! "

It was late when she reached Florence, but the city was still in a tumult, and the streets were filled with rioters.

The Palazzo Medici had been sacked, the rich contents were scattered in the Via Larga—tapestries, furni-

ture, pictures, statues were being rent and destroyed by the light of torches.

The beautiful Medici gardens had also been attacked, the heathen statues lay broken and desolate under the torn and scorched trees ; the palace of the Cardinal had been sacked, and the priceless possessions of Giovanni dei Medici were in the hands of the mob.

The alabaster Persephone which had come from the collection of Pico della Mirandola was being beaten to pieces by a group of men armed with hammers, who were encouraged in it by a Dominican friar.

" Thou dost well ! " cried Aprilis wildly as she rode past. " The false gods are dead, the false tyrants fallen ; thou hast conquered, O prophet ! "

" Christ is King of Florence ! " shouted the monk ; " there is no other Lord ! The armed man hath been cast out and his heathen images destroyed ! "

And he seized the broken white limbs of the Persephone and cast the fragments exultingly in the mud of the street.

Aprilis rode past into the darkness, and as she went, a blood-red ring with a head of Ceres and a dagger set with turkis fell at the feet of the monk.

She left the city by the San Giorgio gate and put her little beast to his utmost to reach the Villa degli Albizzi quickly.

She believed that if she could gain the house before Cristofano returned she was forgiven by Heaven and her penitence accepted.

But were he already there she meant to tell him the truth and accept her banishment.

She found only Vincenzo in the villa.

" I have been in my father's house," she said, " and there was a riot, and I could not return before." She went up to her room and washed the tears from her face and adjusted her gown ; her heart was so cold it seemed to her that she had ceased to feel. Aprilis prayed it might be so.

Long past midnight Cristofano returned—excited, triumphant, as she had known he would be.

He kissed her with easy self-confidence, and all her soul shrank, though her body was submissive.

Laughing, he showed her a cut on his wrist.

" Come upstairs," said Aprilis, " and I will bind it up."

Taking the lamp, she preceded him to her room.

CHAPTER IX

THE JEWELS OF THE MEDICI

Fra Domenico had come to the Prior and told him of another vision Fra Silvestro had had in the night ; after walking from his cell in his sleep into the cloister of the dead, he had been inspired, and had prophesied for a full hour, afterwards falling prostrate with exhaustion, in which condition he lay now.

Savonarola had known of none of this, for he had been closed in his own cell, wrapt in contemplation ; but his suffering and his prayers had been useless ; he had seen, heard nothing—the night had been barren.

He therefore listened eagerly to the visions of Maruffi, in which he believed so implicitly as often to relate them as his own ; in this he was aided by Fra Domenico, who, in his great love and reverence for his Prior, sought to increase his fame by attributing to him the visions vouchsafed to the sick monk ; nor did Savonarola see any deception in this ; the visions came from God, and he knew that they would be better received by the people if he personally attested to them than if he admitted that they appeared to Fra Silvestro only.

It was Maruffi himself who was the only disbeliever in these celestial relations ; when he recovered conscious-

ness he would violently repudiate his own words, saying, "These things come of my illness and not of God."

But this did not shake the faith of Fra Girolamo and Fra Domenico.

Savonarola was writing down these visions in a notebook. His large sinewy hand traced a small and delicate writing; though he despised miniatures, coloured letters, flourished capitals, and Arabic numerals, and such adornments of manuscripts as frivolous and even profane, his calligraphy was beautiful.

Fra Silvestro had again seen the destruction of Rome; this time he had beheld the city levelled to the ground, with her walls destroyed and a foreign army marching through her broken gates.

Savonarola was filled with enthusiasm as he wrote this; he contemplated with joy the overthrow of the Borgia and the cleansing of the iniquities of the Papal *Curia*.

He was, however, disappointed when he heard that Fra Silvestro had said these events were to come to pass in the pontificate of a pope named Clement, and not in the time of himself or Fra Domenico. Of the Borgia Maruffi had prophesied swift destruction, saying that the whole family would be swept from the face of the earth; he had often visions of the Borgia, and often dwelt on the beauty of Lucrezia, wife of Alfonso D'Este, whom he imaged in various guises, but now his vision had been that of Cæsare and Francesco lying dead and naked at the foot of a barren hill, and watched by wolves and foxes, while eagles circled over them.

He had also beheld Ludovico Sforza, the tyrant of Milan, dethroned and flying forsaken, and Naples conquered.

"And what saw he of Florence?" asked Savonarola, and he lifted eyes so swollen and heavy-lidded with fatigue that it seemed as if he had been weeping.

Fra Domenico hesitated. Maruffi, when asked of the future of Florence, had given incoherent answers; he had spoken of purgings and flames, the plague and riot. This Fra Girolamo entered sorrowfully in his book, and then the monk retired.

Soon after the Prior also left the cell and went into the cloister of the dead, where Maruffi had seen his visions.

It was about an hour after the dawn; the frost of the winter night was just melting on the grass and sparkling like dew on the leaves of the laurels and myrtles; the square space of sky above the cloister was colourless, purified of clouds by remote winds. A chill freshness was in the air, very different from the damp cold of the cells or the charcoal-heated atmosphere of the corridors and refectory.

Savonarola lifted his tired face gratefully; the breeze penetrated the thick robe and refreshed his suffering, emaciated body; the simple touch of the morning air on his face greatly encouraged and refreshed him; he thought joyfully of the coming of King Charles and of the redemption of Florence.

As soon as Piero had fled the city ambassadors had been appointed by the Signoria to wait on the King at Pisa. Savonarola had been one of these, but he had not left the city; though not declining the request of the Government, which was also that of the people, he lingered in the hope that the secular envoys would succeed in arranging honourable terms without him, for

he greatly disliked entering into actual politics, and, though he was without doubt the most conspicuous and powerful man in Florence, he lived as retired a life as formerly, and only appeared in public on the occasion of his sermons in the Duomo.

While he walked slowly among the gravestones, prefiguring a Florence reformed and holy, a lay brother came and told him that three Franciscans were at the gate and wished to speak with him.

Savonarola was startled; the Franciscans had never been friendly to him. Fra Mariano, the polished preacher set on by Lorenzo to speak against him, had been of that order, which had always been under the especial patronage of the Medici, and more so than ever since the Prior had alienated Lorenzo from the Dominicans, once also under the patronage of the ruling house.

"Three Franciscans, and at this hour," he murmured, and was further surprised to learn that they were accompanied by three pack mules, heavily laden.

"Bring them in," added the Prior, "here, into the open cloister, where the daylight may fall on them."

For he disliked the monks who had been obsequious to the tyrant more than the tyrant himself.

The lay brother soon returned, followed by the Franciscans: two of them made a reverence at sight of Savonarola, the third remained erect; it was at this third the Prior looked.

Of medium height, he was finely made, and the brown robe concealed neither the youthful grace nor the youthful strength of his figure.

"Have you no more private place in which to receive us, Fra Girolamo?" he asked.

His voice, pleasant, cultivated, and of a curious quality of insincerity, seemed familiar to Savonarola, who, without a word, led the way into the refectory.

This great room was filled with a sunless light which showed the pale coloured fresco of the Last Supper at the end, the benches and small tables for the monks, and the wall pulpit, facing the windows, for the novice reader.

The Franciscan who had spoken followed the Prior to the first table, the other two, whose cowls were drawn over their faces, remained inside the door.

Savonarola seated himself in the chair, with arms, by the topmost table, which was his usual place when dining in the refectory, and looked at his visitor with authoritative sternness; he knew well that an enemy gazed at him from under the brown hood, and his face hardened into lines of haughtiness and reserve.

"Fra Girolamo," said the monk, "I am here to request a service."

So saying, he quietly pushed back his hood, and his tonsured head, young face, and full throat were clearly revealed in the morning light which fell from the window he faced.

For one second the Prior's overwrought brain believed the returned dead stood before him, for the face, pale, haggard, remarkable, was the face of the terrible prince to whom he had denied absolution at Careggi.

"A Medici!" he whispered.

"Giovanni dei Medici," said the youth.

Savonarola rose before his enemy and his superior in the Church.

"I did not know your Eminence," he said sternly. "I was not looking to see you here."

" Yet is it strange," replied the Cardinal, " that I should come to the convent my grandfather founded and my father protected ? The Medici have some right here, father."

" The house of your Eminence has no further rights in Florence," flashed Savonarola. " You and your brother are banished, and there is a heavy price on your heads—dead or living."

The Cardinal smiled with a pride that was more worldly, but as potent, as the haughtiness of the friar.

" That is why I am here," he said. " One churchman cannot betray another."

This assertion of his ecclesiastical authority angered Fra Girolamo.

" It is churchmen such as you, Giovanni dei Medici, that I have ever preached against," he answered. " The mere red robe does not claim any allegiance. I still marvel at your presence."

" Is it forbidden to us to use the virtues of our enemies ? " smiled the Cardinal. " I come to the one man in Florence who will not betray me—what use has Fra Girolamo for the crowns offered by the Signoria for Giovanni dei Medici ? Is it not impossible for the saint and prophet to deliver a hunted man unto death ? "

Savonarola whitened under the cold sarcasm of the words.

" I am no more than the Prior of San Marco," he said ; " but that is sufficient to say that I shall betray no man."

" I did you that justice, father," replied the Cardinal. " I can believe also that you are the one man in Florence whom I can trust with what I am about to say."

" I wish neither the trust nor confidence of your

Eminence," said Fra Girolamo hastily ; " for your own safety begone from here and from Florence."

" First I have to see to that which is dearer to me than my own safety," answered the Cardinal.

There was something in the air of this young Medici that roused the grim admiration of Savonarola as it had been roused by the unbending spirit of his father ; the monk could sympathize with pride and strength, courage and determination ; he found it impossible to despise Giovanni as he despised Piero.

" If you had ruled in your brother's place," he thought, " Florence would have had a harder struggle for her freedom."

" My palace and that of Piero have been sacked, as you will know," continued the young man, " but I have managed to secrete in the house of a friend many of the treasures of my family, things of surpassing value and beauty that I would save for the Medici and for Florence."

" What is it to me," demanded Savonarola, " how many vanities you have rescued from the just fury of Florence ? "

" I bring them here to you, to place them under your protection."

" To me ? "

" To you, Fra Girolamo, because I know you will respect a trust."

The Prior stood angry and silent, like one taken at a disadvantage.

" It is necessary," added the Medici, " that I should now leave Florence. This disguise will no longer serve, nor can I for ever lurk in the Franciscan convent ;

to-day I go. In your hands I leave these treasures; I pray you keep them carefully, together with that library my father founded here. If the Medici return, we will again receive them—if we do not return, keep them for Florence. Preserve them at least from the mob and from the French."

"What are these treasures that you so value?" asked the Prior.

"I have without three mules laden with gems, books, and paintings—the most costly of what I could rescue from my palace and from that of Piero—am I to bring them in? I know that in the Convent of San Marco they will be safe, and probably in no other place in Florence."

"I cannot refuse you," replied Savonarola sternly.

He felt that his enemy was using him, and no generous feeling was roused in him at the Cardinal's trust, which forced him to undertake what he disliked; to him the Convent of San Marco was no place in which to shelter the jewels of the Medici.

However, he left the refectory and gave orders to some of the lay brothers and novices to bring into the convent the bales and packages lading the baggage mules.

As soon as he was gone, Giovanni dei Medici again pulled the cowl over his face and stood thoughtfully looking down at the bare little table.

One of his companions broke the silence.

"He is awful, this monk. He surely has Florence in his hand!"

"For a little while perhaps, but how long do you think his dominion will endure?" returned the Cardinal. "He would turn the city into a monastery and keep all

Florence on their knees—as long as men have flesh on their bones they will not endure that. Man," he added, with a bitter smile, " does not live by bread alone, nor by spiritual food either. The monk forgets the judicious mean."

Savonarola returned, and as he entered cast a quick look at the two within the door whom, till now, he seemed not to have noticed.

" Who are these ? " he asked.

" Carlo dei Visdomini," replied the Cardinal, indicating the monk who had spoken. " The other," he added with a little smile, " is also a Visdomini."

Savonarola turned with disgust from the man who had been the associate of all the debauchees of Piero.

" Your Eminence's goods will be safe," he said briefly. " I have no more to say."

" I am your debtor," replied the Cardinal, " and you must remind me of it, father, when I am more fortunate."

Savonarola gazed at him with gleaming eyes ; he seemed as if about to allow him to depart in silence, then suddenly he advanced before the young priest.

With a haughty gesture Giovanni dei Medici stepped back.

His gaze did not flinch from the dominating glance of the friar, and his full lips curved to a haughty and fierce smile.

" Why hast thou stopped me ? " he demanded, and his tone was that of a superior to an inferior.

" I said I had no further word to say," replied Savonarola, " but there is this, Cardinal dei Medici—a word of warning and of admonition : look to your ways, look to your company, take warning from this great downfall

of your house, else your smiles and your vanities will but deck for you the way to perdition."

The two Visdomini shrank before these words and the fierce white face of the friar, who uttered them with force and power as if he pronounced a just though awful doom.

But the Medici listened calmly; his intense worldliness was unaffected by any spiritual terrors; his look showed he passed Savonarola's words as mere raving.

"I know you will respect my trust, father," was his sole reply.

Savonarola turned away without a word, and the three left the convent.

As they stepped into the piazza where the now unladen mules waited, the slighter of the Cardinal's two companions glanced up at him, and the winter sunlight, striking within the hood, revealed the fine features and red locks of Fiora dei Visdomini.

"Why hast thou trusted that terrible man?" she shuddered.

"Child," replied the Cardinal calmly, "I have trusted the only man in Florence who will not betray us. And I know that the jewels are safe."

Mounting the mules, they rode towards the Porta alla Croce.

CHAPTER X

THE NEW CYRUS

WHILE Savonarola stood in the cloister watching the last bales of the Medicean treasure carried to the safety of the library, where the books of Cosimo were still kept, he was told that Cristofano degli Albizzi wished to see him; the Prior would sooner not have been disturbed by further mundane affairs, and he received the young noble gloomily.

Cristofano's ban of exile had been removed since the downfall of the Medici, as had that of the Pazzi and other families who had been banished by Lorenzo. Therefore the Albizzi was now free of Florence and becoming a man of some importance in the city, owing to the money of Ser Rosario and the prestige he had acquired by his intimacy with the Court of Milan.

He had been chosen as one of the envoys to accompany Piero dei Capponi on his mission to the French at Pisa, but Astorre della Gherardesca was already of that embassage and Cristofano did not wish to be his companion. Though they were both of the same party and frequently forced into association, they could not choose but hate each other because of Aprilis.

Cristofano bore a rancour against the man who had refused the woman who was now his wife, and Astorre was fierce with Cristofano for having secured a fortune that should have been his ; and his hate was the deeper because he had begun to think that he might have been mistaken about Aprilis, and could have married her, without hurt to his honour and with great benefit to his pocket. Therefore Astorre went to Pisa, and the Albizzi remained in Florence.

Savonarola looked at him without much sympathy as he stood before him in his handsome self-assurance. Success had slightly changed Cristofano ; the dreamy eyes were keener, the quiet smile more confident, the worldly lines of mouth and chin more pronounced in their fullness ; nor was his dress of azure velvet and orange cloth very fitting to one of the Piagnoni, or followers of the friar who preached rigid austerity.

" You have heard the news from Pisa ? " he asked instantly after he had kissed the Prior's hand.

" Nay," said Fra Girolamo, and his eyes began to flash with doubt and suspicion.

" The city has risen in revolt," replied Cristofano briefly. " They have driven out the Florentine officials, overturned the Marzocco, and regained their liberty."

Savonarola flushed darkly, and the muscles of his face quivered with rage ; for a moment he stared as if he could not believe this news, disastrous indeed to the Republic, who thus at a blow was robbed of her fairest conquest.

" And the King of France ? " he demanded at length.

" Your Cyrus, father," said the Albizzi, " has en-

couraged the Pisans, thereby inflicting a great wrong on Florence."

"There must be war!" flashed Fra Girolamo. "Pisa must be recovered!"

"I think we shall have our hands full in defending our own liberty. Charles comes as a conqueror to Florence—the words and promises of the Medici have had an effect on His Majesty; Alfonsina dei Medici has been at the camp imploring him to restore the poor Piero, and this it seems he is minded to do."

Cristofano spoke with bitterness and anger, for he knew that if the weight of the French was thrown on the side of the Medici there would be an end of the new liberty of Florence.

"He must be minded to do other things," replied Fra Girolamo; "this is not the work appointed to him."

"He is no hero," said Cristofano, "no paladin, no David—nay, no Cyrus! I fear, father, your champion is but a sorry choice."

"The Lord chooses strange instruments," murmured Savonarola, but he looked troubled; all the stories that he had heard of the excesses and weaknesses of Charles returned to his mind.

Yet he was not to be shaken from his original belief in the King of France as the regenerator of the Church and the deliverer of Florence from the Medici; had not this been foreseen in the visions of Maruffi and his own?

"Father," said Cristofano earnestly, "put not too much faith in this Charles of France. He will disappoint all expectations, and when the people see whom

you laud as your champion you will lose credit with them."

He spoke from policy, sincerely meaning what he said; he believed the French King would fail all hopes, and that his failure would bring disgrace and perhaps ruin on the party of Savonarola.

But Savonarola was not thinking of policy, but only of obeying the Divine visions which had told him that Charles was to be the new Cyrus; his own pure, fierce enthusiasm exalted his elected champion and glorified him with a glory no words of dispraise could dim.

"Will you go to Pisa and speak to His Highness?" asked Cristofano abruptly. "It was the wish of the Signoria and of the people that you should have gone before, father."

"I will go," replied the Prior instantly. "I will go and tell this Prince what his mission is and what God expects of him. I will threaten him with a judgment if he does not hearken to the voice of the Lord."

"Ay, father," said the Albizzi, "if you would have him come in peace, it is best you go to him—to the other envoys he has spoken coldly and offered no terms. 'All will be settled,' he says, 'when I am in the great town.' The French are pillaging and ravaging Tuscany, and, as I said, have encouraged the revolt of Pisa; therefore, Fra Girolamo, if you would save Florence from a sack and from the return of the Medici——"

Savonarola interrupted.

"These things shall not be!" he said. "I will go to Pisa."

He was turning away under the cloister arches when

he paused to add, " Where now is Piero dei Medici, Messere ? "

" From Bologna he went to Venice, but it is believed that he will return to the French camp—no one knows where the Cardinal is hiding."

" Before midday I shall set forth," said Fra Girolamo, and he turned into the convent and sought the quiet of his cell.

His spirits were roused and troubled ; he had always disliked the Pisans, for they had refused to listen to him when he had preached there, and had mocked him, by which he had gauged their ungodliness ; their revolt was also a most serious blow to the power of the Republic, and would probably be followed by the rising of the other towns, such as Arezzo, which were under the domination of Florence. For both these reasons Savonarola was agitated to hear of the rebellion ; he was also vexed that Charles should so fail, and he sat for a while overcome with great despondency, shaken by a terrible melancholy, such as had before attacked him and which made him doubt himself, his inspirations, and even the visions of Fra Silvestro. But he struggled with and overcame this gloom. " The visions *were* of God, Christ *is* with me," he said aloud, and he composed himself to pray. That day he started for Pisa, accompanied by two monks, and going on foot, as was his invariable custom.

On the third day they reached the lovely city on the mouth of the Arno, and joined the Florentine envoys who were under the protection of the French. It was late afternoon when they arrived, and the city was beautiful in the fading light, the noble sweep of pink

and yellow palaces following the great curve of the green river, the graceful span of the bridges and the magnificent pile of the white Duomo and the leaning campanile.

But Savonarola observed only the overturned statue of Marzocco stuck in the mudbank of the Arno, the Pisan flag floating in place of the red oriflamme of Florence, and the licence of the French soldiery in the streets.

He had always disliked the city ; the vaunted Duomo did not move his admiration, and the leaning tower he looked upon as a blasphemous frivolity which had been accomplished by the aid of the Devil. He demanded to be taken at once before the King of France, and the Florentine envoys, who were becoming more and more alarmed at the situation, gladly assented.

The Prior bathed his feet, wounded by the dust and roughness of the road, drank a little soup with some wheaten bread dipped in it, and set out to meet Charles of France.

The King was lodging in one of the noblest of the Pisan palaces, for all the citizens had combined to flatter him, and magnificent gifts of jewels and money had been given to him and his nobles for tacitly permitting the revolt against Florence and the expulsion of the Florentine rectors.

Arezzo and Montepulciano had already also thrown off the yoke of Florence, and Charles began to consider himself as the conqueror of Florence and the chivalrous protector of the Medici.

To-day, however, he was troubled on two accounts, first because Madonna Diana, a beautiful Milanese who

had accompanied him from the court of Ludovico Sforza, had suddenly died of a mysterious disease which was feared might be the plague, and secondly because he had just received definite news that the Pope, after inviting him to Italy, had now turned against him, having been bribed by Fervante of Naples to change sides; a surfeit of Tuscan wines and forced peaches had also afflicted him with sickness; but when he heard that Savonarola wished to see him he became greatly excited, and begged the friar to come at once into his presence.

Charles believed implicitly in the sacredness of his mission: he thought that he was appointed to conquer Italy and then the Turks; he had visions of himself being crowned Emperor of Christendom in Constantinople and of converting all the infidel.

He was now twenty-four, the age of Piero dei Medici; until he was thirteen his life had been poisoned by terror of his father, the terrible Louis XI., who had kept him practically a prisoner in the Castle of Amboise; there his sole employment had been to read and brood over the romances of chivalry and to dream of one day emulating the deeds of Charlemagne or King Arthur. At thirteen he had come to the throne, and since then his life had been enclosed in continuous flatteries; he had been told that he would outrival Cæsar, Alexander, and Saint Louis, and he already considered himself the equal of the heroes of his boyhood's reading. The marvellous success of the much-debated descent into Italy had further confirmed his belief in his own greatness; indeed, all the French regarded the action of Piero dei Medici in bloodlessly surrendering the Republic as nothing short of Divine intervention on their behalf.

With respect and awe Charles awaited the appearance of the prophet who had proclaimed his victorious coming ; he had with him Cardinal Brissonet and several French nobles.

Savonarola passed through courtyards full of soldiers and chambers full of pages and ladies without giving a glance to any.

His cowl was drawn over his face, and his white robe was stained and torn from the journey ; in his right hand he grasped the black crucifix which hung from the rosary of thick beads at his girdle. When he entered the presence-chamber he paused immediately inside the door and looked round for his champion, the Lord's appointed, the new Cyrus.

He saw a group of splendid men, dressed in rich and fantastic garments embroidered with blossoms and trimmed with fur and gold, very different from the rich but simple fashions of Florence, and his eye flashed over these with an almost wistful eagerness.

His glance rested on the chair of gilded oak in the centre of the group near to which stood the French Cardinal.

The youth seated in the chair wore an azure tunic thickly embroidered with golden bees, a short mantle lined with ermine, and white hose gartered with gold. Blushing and stammering, he half rose, waved his hand, and bid the Prior welcome in a few words of bad Italian, which he altered to a Latin salutation.

Savonarola regarded him keenly, and as he looked the shadow of disappointment fell over the ardent face of the friar.

Charles was a dwarf, so slight in his body, so narrow

in his shoulders, so thin in his legs that he seemed a stunted child.

His feet were deformed, and he wore huge shoes of white velvet to conceal this—a fashion which was followed by his courtiers.

His head was huge in proportion to his body and fell forward on the weak neck; his hair was light, straight and scanty, and in parts had fallen off, leaving bare patches on his skull; his face was pale with the thick pallor of ill-health, and quite smooth and hairless; his eyes were nearly white, and he blinked continually, being extremely short-sighted; his mouth was huge and hung open, showing his feeble broken teeth; his expression was that of one continually bewildered in mind and suffering in body; his appearance that of one diseased in blood, bone, and flesh, and unbalanced in mind.

At the moment his foolish eyes shone with enthusiasm, and he stared at Savonarola with admiration and awe; he would have risen before the friar, but Cardinal Brissonet laid a gently restraining hand on his shoulder, and he sank back, blushing again, a dusky wave across his pallor.

The monk made no reverence either to the King, the Cardinal, or the nobles; he looked at Charles with such singleness of purpose that it seemed as if he thought himself alone with him in the chamber.

"Thou," continued the King in Latin, still stammering, partly from agitation and partly from a natural impediment in his speech owing to the thickness of his tongue, "art the prophet who foretold my coming and my victories?"

Savonarola, advancing a step, replied in the same language.

"I am he, O most Christian King, who didst foretell that thou wert appointed to do the Lord's work in cleansing Italy and purging the Church, in bringing the wrath of God on Florence even as Cyrus brought it upon Babylon!"

An expression of rapt pride and pleasure shone on the King's face.

"So it is, so it is," he said; "we are a great knight and conqueror, as hath been always said—hath it not been always said, Brissonet?—eh? This is a noble prophet—a noble prophet;" and he nodded his great head complacently.

Fra Girolamo drew himself erect; his gaunt frame, bent with fatigue and sickness, straightened into the carriage of a soldier; at the impression of great height he made, the King shrank further back into the gilt chair.

"Wilt thou enter Florence as a conqueror?" Girolamo demanded.

"As a conqueror, eh?" repeated Charles. "Yes, of course, as a conqueror—like Cæsar or Alexander—or who was it—Cyrus, yes, Cyrus; he was a famous conqueror, was he not, Brissonet?"

"I have heard, O King," said Fra Girolamo, "that thou art not well disposed towards the Republic of Florence."

"Well disposed?" repeated Charles in a troubled way, looking helplessly at Cardinal Brissonet. "We are well disposed—but—what was it we had to say?—eh?—ah, as—knights—fellow-princes we must protect the Medici—that was it—for chivalry."

Savonarola raised his hand towards heaven, a gesture common with him when greatly moved.

"Thou art an instrument in the hands of the Lord, O most Christian King, who hath sent thee to relieve the woes of Italy, as for many years I have foretold, and He sendeth thee to reform the Church which now lieth prostrate in the dust."

Charles shrank and shivered; his look of pleasure changed to one of vague alarm; his trembling made all the golden bees gleam and shake as if they danced together on his azure vest.

"Listen to me," added Savonarola, "for I speak as God moves me. If thou be not just and merciful, if thou shouldst fail to respect the city of Florence, its women, its citizens, its liberty, if thou shouldst forget the task the Lord hath sent thee to perform, then He will choose another to fulfil it."

Not the King alone, but the nobles and even the Cardinal were now terrified; they remembered their marvellous good fortune so miraculously granted them, and quaked lest this should be taken from them because of their unworthiness.

"And more than this," added Fra Girolamo in a terrible voice, "if thou dost not take heed of thy steps and do as the Lord directs, His hand shall smite and chastise thee with terrible scourges; thou shalt be put down and severely admonished, and all thy goods shall go from thee, and death shall seize thee in the flower of thy days—these things I say to thee in the name of the Lord."

Charles whitened with real terror, the remembrance of his sins came over him with an agony; in his heart he instantly resolved to reform and do penance.

"We will deal honourably by Florence," he gasped; "we will, we will respect the city—as we ever meant to—eh, Brissonet?"

"Florence is the ally of your Highness," replied the Cardinal hastily; he also was shaken by the menace of the friar's words, "and your Highness never meant to behave as other to the city."

The King caught eagerly at these words, and repeated them in his thick voice, now the more incoherent through fear.

"A friend, a friend, we come as a friend, holy friar," he added eagerly, "as an ally, as the champion you foretold! All shall be respected, all shall be protected! we swear it——"

Savonarola looked at him sternly and sadly.

"May I take these words of thine to the Signoria?" he asked gravely, "for as their ambassador I stand before thee."

"Yea, tell them so!" cried Charles, waving his hand in excitement. "Tell my good friends the Florentines so, holy father!"

"I go to take this message," replied Savonarola, "and when thou art in the city I shall call thee, O King, to account for these promises now made."

So saying, and ignoring all the King's embarrassed and frightened attempts to detain him, he turned and left the apartment.

As he departed from the palace he was greeted by one of the former envoys to the French, the man who had now become one of his own followers, Astorre della Gherardesca.

The Conte was on horseback and in company with

Olimpia da Sansovino, whose husband had been one of the officials expelled from Pisa during the revolt.

Savonarola recognized the lady, whom he had seen with her lord in Florence, and his brow darkened. She on her part turned her black eyes haughtily on the friar and made him but a scant reverence.

Astorre, however, was respectful; he bowed to the power if not to the worth of Savonarola.

"You have obtained better terms from His Highness?" he asked eagerly. "All our hopes have been on you, father."

"I have delivered to the King the message I was appointed to deliver," replied the Prior coldly, "and you, Signor Conte, may return to Florence when you will."

"Will you not come in our company?" asked Astorre, who still remained with his cap in his hand. "I escort Madonna Olimpia back to Florence with the other envoys."

"Where is Messere Sansovino?" asked Savonarola.

Olimpia answered—

"Alas! he is a prisoner in the hands of the Pisans, father."

"Then your place is in Pisa, and your attire should be a humble habit, not these gauds," said Fra Girolamo. Turning to the Conte, he added in a menacing tone, "Return to Florence and return alone—if you bring that woman, another's wife, with you, you bring a curse within the gates, and woe unto you!"

Astorre paled, and Olimpia dropped her veil. Without another word, Savonarola turned away and went straight to where his two monks waited for him; having

briefly told them that he had accomplished his mission, he at once set out on the return journey to the beloved city of his adoption.

He was regardless of the falling night, of his own fatigue, of his helplessness against the perils of the way ; his heart was full of joy over the good news he was taking to Florence.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE TIME OF LILIES

King Charles the Ninth entered Florence on the 17th of November; despite his awe of Savonarola and the promises he had made, he rode with levelled lance and with the full pomp of war, the signs of a conqueror.

Gorgeous preparations had been made for his reception: the city again took on the likeness of one of the Medicean carnivals, rich stuffs were hung from the houses, triumphal arches and canopies were erected, and the streets were hung with lights for illumination at night.

The Signoria went to meet the King at the San Mediano gate and presented him with an address of welcome, which should have been delivered by Messere Luca Corsini; but his horse grew restive, rain began to fall, and the ceremony was spoilt; only one of the palace officers had the wit to move forward and speak a few words in French, at which Charles shook his head as if he did not understand, and the cavalcade proceeded through the city.

The King was clothed in black velvet, with a floating mantle of gold brocade, and a flat gold hat, to which

were fastened several white feathers by a ruby clasp; beside him rode Cardinal Brissonet and the Italian Cardinal of San Piero in Vincoli, he who had defied the Borgia with the cannon of the Castel San Angelo and urged this expedition on Charles; several French officers followed, carrying the baton of Maréchal de France, and then four drums and two pipes which performed a shrill and martial music.

The army that followed caused terror, amazement, and admiration, not unmingled with some amusement; the awe inspired by the finest army they had ever seen was not sufficient to check the satirical spirit of the Florentines, which was excited by the deformity of the King, the ear-splitting noise of his kettledrums, the parti-coloured garments of the Swiss infantry, the horses of the cuirassiers with their cropped manes and tails, and the wild and fierce aspect of the Scotch archers with their gigantic wooden bows—these seemed to the refined Tuscans as much beasts as men.

The cavalry, composed of the flower of the young French nobility, they admitted to be magnificent; the armour, the arms, the banners, the garments, the chargers, and the jewelled ornaments were among the finest in the world.

Yet the Florentines were more inclined to ridicule than admire, new and wonderful as was the sight of this standing army of twelve thousand men to a people used only to mercenaries, and who had lately lost in ease and luxury the art of warfare in which they had once excelled the world.

The full strength of Charles could not be judged by the contingents that followed him, for his artillery was

marching ahead of him to Rome ; he had left many towns and fortresses garrisoned, and another large body of men were proceeding by way of the Romagna. The Ponte Vecchio was decorated for their passing, and, despite the rain, a pageant was presented in the Piazza della Signoria, at which Charles smiled inanely, being fully occupied in curbing his beautiful horse, who seemed to disdain and despise his rider.

Then, passing through the Canto dei Pazzi, where the restored family of the Pazzi greeted them from the balcony, they swept round the Piazza del Duomo, the Piazza di San Giovanni, and stopped before the door of Santa Maria del Fiore.

The vast crowd acclaimed Charles and applauded the name of France ; the King muttered a few words in incoherent Italian and passed into the church.

After a short service and prayers in which French and Florentines joined, the Signoria escorted the King to the Medici palace in the Via Larga, which had been restored to something of its old splendour for his reception ; the soldiers went to the various houses where they were billeted, and the King reposed himself before the great banquet being prepared for the evening.

Aprilis had watched the procession from an upper window of the Fiorivanti palace. Cristofano was one of those who had met Charles at the San Frediano Gate. She saw his scarlet mantle among the horsemen who accompanied the King through the gates of the Medici palace, from above which the shield with the arms of the fallen family had been removed and replaced with the cross of the Republic.

Aprilis gazed on the moving banners, all besprinkled

with golden bees and lilies, and felt as if she gazed at the figures of a dream.

She recalled the night of the Carnival of San Giovanni—the wolf-mask thrumming the theorbo in the magic dusk, the journey to Cafaggiuolo, Cristofano a prisoner—and now all changed—turned upside down—the Medici were proscribed fugitives, Cristofano was riding into the palace from which they had been cast.

Passion was dead in Aprilis, and joy of life and vanity, and pride and happiness. She looked coldly on what once had moved her to ecstasy; she was indifferent to beauty, which she had once worshipped, and to the name of love, for which she had once so eagerly sought.

These things now repelled her, she could even think of them with a certain horror; a vast indifferency towards the world enveloped her, the shadow of the Cross had fallen across her heart, chilling it to lifelessness.

The disasters that had befallen her city preoccupied her more than those which had broken her own life; she was now acutely conscious of all the misery and disease and poverty and cruelty in Florence, which had always been there, but which she had never noticed before in her self-absorbed pursuit of happiness; the ruin and misery that had followed the invasion of the French affected her keenly; she was haunted in her sleep by the faces of the poor peasants pouring into Florence with their families mounted on the lean and patient mules, these pitiful figures mingled in her dreams with the figure of Savonarola and the dolorous Virgin of Cafaggiuolo with the seven swords in her breast. Aprilis felt no desire now to do other than suffer too;

she had given up all hopes and desires when she had given herself to Cristofano; she was no longer grateful to him, and her spirit seemed very alienated from his, but she tried to please him, to submit and be dutiful.

To her his personality was clouded by the vagueness that at present obscured for her the world. So strong was this sense of unreality, that sometimes Aprilis wondered if her heart had broken the night she left the sleeping Medici and her brain been shaken by the powerful revulsion of emotion that had sent her back to Florence and to Cristofano.

Something at least, call it heart or brain or soul, had changed in her, she was like one perpetually waiting for a judgment to befall, continually stunned by a sense of disaster; the prophecies of Savonarola and all the tales of horror and terror that had reached Florence from the scenes of the French violence at Rapallo and in Tuscany, rang in her ears day and night.

The French pomp which would before have pleased her, now did not move her at all; only the tears came to her eyes at the sight of a king with levelled lance, riding through the streets of Florence.

Presently she went down to the loggia, and it was there Cristofano found her when he rode up from the Medici palace.

He greeted her pleasantly; he had accepted her attitude of gentle obedience and sad reserve. What he thought of the mystery he named Aprilis he never betrayed; he accepted her as his wife, and seemed proud of her in defiance of the other men who had refused her; he took her as a jewel others had cast away as false, but which by wearing openly he had proved to be genuine.

For the rest he went his way, and appeared totally occupied in ambition.

Now, as he came up to Aprilis, and began telling her of the incidents of the day, a sense of antagonism made her pale, a sense of repulsion to his triumph, his pleasure, his success.

For a moment, memories of the old passions, the old splendours, stung her almost into madness, she could have struck her husband's smooth face turned so confidently close to hers. Then her glance caught the figure of a Dominican proceeding up the Via Larga; she shuddered, and her usual resignation returned.

"It is Fra Girolamo," she said, as the monk came nearer. "Had he then no part in to-day's festivities?"

"Nay, neither he nor any of his friars. He keeps apart, and wisely," replied the Albizzi with some satisfaction; he had noted with eager pleasure that the friar was keeping in the background.

"Why wisely?" asked Aprilis. "He is the most powerful man in Florence, and this day's work is his doing, I think."

"His and that of other men," said Cristofano, thinking of his own share, which he did not consider meagre. "Fra Girolamo is great when he is in the pulpit, but in actual politics it is best that he let others take the lead."

"And yet you call yourself his follower!" said Aprilis quietly.

Cristofano smiled.

"I strive to be a follower of no man," he replied, with an evenness that did not conceal the arrogance of the words.

"I know," said his wife in the same tone.

"Where goes Savonarola?" asked Cristofano curiously, and as he spoke the monk turned into a door nearly opposite, the residence of the Conte della Mirandola.

"Ah," murmured Aprilis. "I have heard that the Conte is very ill."

Cristofano crossed himself.

"God preserve us from a like dismal end!" he said lightly, yet with a certain grief, and he turned into the house to speak with Ser Rosario.

But Aprilis remained on the loggia and looked up at the windows behind which she knew Fra Girolamo watched with the sick.

And as she guessed, it was a death-bed to which the monk had been hastily summoned.

The phœnix of learning, the wonder of scholars, the Prince famous for his knowledge, his beauty, his charm, lay dying, forgotten in the city which had once done him such honour, and in which he had been so famous.

No one cared now about Pico della Mirandola, as no one cared about Lorenzo dei Medici; their old glories were overthrown, and a new era had begun.

The Conte died in the flower of his days, but he had outlived his time.

Christ had triumphed over Plato and Apollo, over Learning and Beauty, the suffering image of the Madonna had obscured the joyous loveliness of Venus.

And Mirandola died repentant and forsaking the old gods.

In a room stripped of everything, on a plain bed with a woollen quilt, he lay and watched the thin rain descending from the November clouds.

The sound of the French drums and trumpets had disturbed his dying slumbers.

He had awakened to weep for the fair city of his adoption, on whom judgment had so swiftly fallen.

Towards four of the clock he had failed so rapidly that Andrea de Salvucci had sent for Savonarola, and the Prior, who had refused to take part in the day's pageantry, had come at once to the bedside of Lorenzo's friend and Ticino's pupil.

When he entered the chamber, the young noble was past movement ; the long disease that had wasted him, augmented by the fevers of the summer, and his late mortifications, had sapped the last of his strength ; he lay motionless, with his head turned towards the window and his hands by his side straightly.

Savonarola went to the bedside and looked down at him sadly ; as far as it was left to him to love any human being Fra Girolamo loved the beautiful young Lombard, the most incongruous of all his disciples.

Giovanni Pico had put aside beauty now, the head resting on the stiff white pillow was no longer fair, the blond locks shorn, the bright eyes dimmed, the curving nostrils and arched lips pinched and shrunken, the cheeks fallen and tinged with the lifeless pallor of decay.

His glance flickered for a moment over Savonarola and his lips stirred.

Andrea was by him, and no one else from all the thousands of his one time admirers and flatterers.

" My son, how art thou to-day ? " asked Fra Girolamo, and he bent low to catch the whispered reply—

" Better—better—nearer Paradise. Will you watch with me a little ? "

Savonarola took the low stool beside the bed and lifted one of the poor thin hands.

There was nothing more to be done ; extreme unction had been administered the day before, the dying man had confessed, and been absolved ; he had disposed of his property.

And he had expressed his last wishes.

These were simple—only that he might be buried in the habit of a Dominican and laid to rest in San Marco, as Poligiano had been.

And Savonarola had promised.

Mirandola now reminded him of that promise.

" In the habit, father—thou wilt remember ? And lay me on a bed of ashes with a rope round my waist—why did I delay ? "

The muttered words came slowly and hoarsely.

" Why did I—delay ? But I thought I might have lived till the spring—the time of lilies—she—she, the wise woman, said. And is not this the time of lilies ? Has not Florence been full of lilies, French lilies, to-day ? "

" Even so," replied Savonarola. " This is the time of lilies foretold to thee, and thou art very near the confines of this world, Giovanni ; but fear not when thy feet touch the dark waters and the dark clouds envelop thine eyes—the Lord is merciful, Christ is kind."

" I would I had died a monk," murmured Mirandola, and his eyes filled with large tears of weakness.

The dusk was falling, and the illuminations in honour of Charles began to cast their glimmer into the chamber of the dying man.

Songs and laughter from groups of French soldiery

rose from the chill twilit street, the rain clouds broke over a pale amber sunset.

And in the hour of the sunset Giovanni Pico died in the arms of Savonarola, gasping out his last breath on the words, " Thy will be done—into Thy hands—Thy will be done on earth as in heaven."

" And what wilt thou do ? " asked the monk as he rose from his prayers beside the dead and saw the young secretary kneeling forlornly on the other side of the bed.

" Father, if thou wilt give my master a habit now he is dead, wilt thou give one to me while I am living ? I would be a novice at San Marco."

CHAPTER XII

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

CHARLES of France lingered in Florence ; at first, despite his awe of Savonarola, his terms had been high and haughty, but the firm front of Piero dei Capponi had brought him to reason, and a treaty was signed such as Florence could honourably accept.

The King no longer ventured, as at first he had ventured, to speak of the return of Piero dei Medici and to designate Florence " the conquered city."

The Florentines were to buy back the three towns by the end of two years, Charles was to receive the title of Protector of Florence, the Pisans were to be pardoned when they returned to their allegiance, the decree putting a price on the heads of Giovanni and Piero was to be revoked, but both were to be banished beyond the Tuscan borders, and their estates were to remain confiscate until Piero's debts had been paid.

It was also agreed that if the King's war with Naples ended before the two years the fortresses were to be immediately restored, and the amount to be paid Charles was fixed, after much contention, at a hundred and twenty thousand ducats,—thus dear had the folly of the Magnifico cost the Republic.

Charles went in state to the Duomo and swore to these things before the high altar, as likewise did the Signoria.

And so the matter being settled, all men waited for the departure of the French, but Charles lingered.

His feeble idleness had overcome him, he found the city pleasant, the life luxurious, the expenses paid by others, and indulgence easy to his hand. In vain the leading citizens represented to him the state of the town, the inconvenience of the soldiery being quartered on the inhabitants, the constant brawls between native and foreigner, the suspension of all trade and business, the disorder, the nightly robberies and murders, unusual for Florence.

In vain was put before him his delayed mission, the advantages this pause was giving Rome and Naples; in vain were attempts made to rouse him, to flatter him into action.

He remained in a state of lassitude, indulging in excesses which further disgusted the Florentines, who were used to splendid and graceful vices; he was now absolutely unpopular, and his presence was looked upon as a curse which men prayed daily might be speedily removed.

But Charles gave no sign of going; it was as if he had forgotten Naples and Rome and all the ambitious projects with which he had descended in Italy.

Among his amusements was that of examining and stealing the various gorgeous objects in the palace in which he had been so lavishly and generously entertained.

The magnificent collections of the Medici were ravaged first by Charles, then by his nobles, and then by the

soldiers and servants, and those things they did not care about or understand, they defaced or destroyed ; thus the treasures that had escaped the fury of the mob were seized by the French, and nothing remained of what had once been the glory of Florence save the few cases of gems Giovanni dei Medici had confided to the care of Savonarola. For the rest the life-work, the results of the culture, learning, and taste of Cosimo and Lorenzo were in a short time dispersed, and the city lost the heritage the best of the Medici had so laboured to leave. Pictures were wantonly damaged, tapestries unravelled for the sake of the gold thread they contained, and many gorgeous books of whose contents the French were ignorant were used to light the fires.

Charles, who knew nothing of art and who was utterly uncultured, surveyed this destruction calmly, never considering that the Florentines had trusted him with the treasures of the Medici, and reserved what he considered the most valuable for himself.

To this end he always kept the key of the jewel cabinet in his own possession, intending before his departure to remove the entire contents.

But one day after dinner Jeanne de Brissac, wife of the Seigneur de la Tournville, coaxed this key from the King and flew off to explore behind the locked door which had so often provoked her curiosity. Charles was sick that day, his head ached and his limbs were heavy, a weight seemed to lie on his chest and his heart, and he kept his mouth continually open to breathe.

Yet he would not bear the windows open, and sat close by a fire of pine and olive wood which gave out a dense heat, drying the atmosphere. By his side was a table

bearing a dish of sweet cakes, a bottle of mineral water, and a drink composed of boiled milk, white wine, lemons, and crushed apples.

His seat was propped with silk cushions and his poor body wrapped in a purple and gold robe ; his enormous feet rested on a foldstool of blue velvet, his white and crooked hands lay in his lap, and his pale eyes blinked into the flames with a sad expression.

In a corner of the same room two generals were playing chess, and by the window Cardinal Brissonet was writing at a gilt table.

Charles drank the milk and wine, which revived his spirits a little, and then looked round for something to amuse him.

And at this moment Jeanne de Brissac re-entered the apartment.

At sight of her the King smiled.

She was slim and pretty, and her hair, of the palest gold, was wonderfully arranged in plaits and braids which encircled her delicate head like an elaborate diadem.

She had now decked herself in the Medicean treasures and stood, lightly smiling, to invite the admiration of the King.

Round the marvellous hair and round the fine slim throat were clasped ornaments of Etruscan gold, leaves and berries of the laurel and the oak ; in her little ears hung great drops of lapis lazuli carved like the petals of a flower ; on the front of her white velvet bodice, cut tight after the French fashion, blazed a jewel of ruby, sapphire, and yellow diamond ; round her waist hung a long girdle of pink and white shell cameos linked to-

gether with chased silver in the shape of nymphs and dolphins.

With an elegant, sidling walk, she came before the King, her fairness tinged golden red from the blaze of the fire.

" There are some truly magnificent treasures yonder," she said in her arch high voice, " that your Highness must come and inspect."

Charles smiled vapidly.

" The most beautiful is before me, eh ? " he answered.

Jeanne affected to misunderstand the compliment. " Your Highness will think me a proper thief, but I put on the jewels only to show your Highness how fine they are ! "

" They are worth a good many ducats, I doubt not," replied Charles. " We will take them back to France, will we not, *ma chèrie ?* "

" That is for your Highness to decide," smiled Jeanne. " These I wear are but trifles compared with those still in the cabinet."

" Which means that you have come to beg them, eh ? " asked Charles with a cunning look.

Jeanne shook her head.

" No, I came to show you this, sire, which is the finest gem of all."

And she put on the table, among the wine-glasses, the famous emerald unicorn.

The unique beauty of the stone caught even the dull and ignorant eye of Charles ; he seized it in his feeble fingers and held it before the blaze of the clear flames.

" Emerald ! " he muttered, " genuine emerald ! "

" A table emerald of almost priceless value," said the

clear, practical tones of the Frenchwoman, which she vainly endeavoured to render sentimental. "There can scarcely be another such in the world."

The King called to a tall and slightly sombre-looking gentleman who was watching the two generals play chess.

"Sieur de Commines," he said, "what think you of this stone?"

Philippe de Commines looked at the precious intaglio somewhat sternly; he did not approve of Jeanne de Brissac, nor yet of the lawless plundering of which the French were showing themselves guilty, nor did he approve of the expedition into Italy; in his heart he did not approve of King Charles.

"I have heard of this stone, sire," he replied; "it is the great pride of the Medicean collection—an antique intaglio—perfect workmanship, a flawless stone of marvellous size."

"What is it worth?" asked Charles greedily.

"I have heard the worth, sire," said De Commines dryly, "estimated at seven thousand ducats."

The King sucked his lips.

"We will keep this ourselves," he remarked, caressing the gem.

"It would show more noble, Christian and kingly in your Highness," replied De Commines, "to leave untouched the possessions of the Florentines."

Charles looked at him timidly; he was afraid of this man, who had been the friend and counsellor of his terrible father.

"Yes, yes," he said hastily. "Christian and kingly, we must be that; you are right, sieur, you are right—but the emerald, the good Florentines will give us that."

The other was about to reply sternly when one of the King's chamberlains entered.

The Prior of San Marco was below, he said, and wished to see the King, nor would he go even when the officers in attendance refused him admission.

" Why do they refuse him ? " stammered Charles, purpling with rage.

" They are afraid this righteous man will interfere with their robbing and plundering," interposed De Commines dryly.

" The prophet ! " shrieked Charles, " the holy man whom I venerate ! He who foretold my coming ! The saint ! You shut him out ! Jays and owls, admit him immediately ! "

The chamberlain withdrew. The King, muttering with anger, sank back exhausted on his cushions. Jeanne de Brissac stood pouting ; she was angry at this intrusion of the friar just when she had hoped to coax the King into giving her the jewels she wore and perhaps even the emerald, but she did not dare say anything against Savonarola, knowing the awe and reverence Charles had for the prophet.

In a few minutes the friar entered, and stood unbending before the King as he had stood in Pisa.

Charles rose, with profuse apologies and kind expressions of welcome ; the two other people on the hearth stared at Savonarola with interest, De Commines respectfully and Madame de Tournville insolently.

Fra Girolamo's dark tired eyes had the same sad glance for all, his gaze flickered over the three and then rested on the two generals and the Cardinal, who had now ceased their occupations and were looking at him.

Then the monk's gaze turned to the pallid countenance of the King.

" Why dost thou linger here, Charles of France ? " he demanded.

Charles shook and flushed ; Jeanne de Brissac's eyes sparkled with wrath as brightly as her plundered jewels.

" This is not thy city nor thy place," continued Savonarola. " What did I tell thee in Pisa ? "

The King dropped the emerald on the table and gazed pitifully at the monk.

" I warned thee, and I warn thee again, most Christian Prince—hearken to the voice of God's servant ! "

" I will, I will," cried Charles eagerly.

" Pursue thy journey without delay. Thy stay here is causing great injury to our city and to thine own enterprise."

" It is just," muttered the King contritely. " It is just ! "

" Thou losest time," continued Savonarola, " forgetful of the duty imposed on thee by Providence and to the serious hurt of thine own spiritual welfare. Take warning, go thy ways, and seek not to bring ruin on this city and thereby rouse the anger of the Lord against thee ! "

Charles wiped the dews of terror from his prominent forehead.

" I go, I go," he murmured. " Holy prophet, I go to fulfil my mission ! "

" It is well," returned Fra Girolamo. " Go in peace and earn the blessing of Heaven, and keep the fear of God before thee, Charles of France, as you would escape damnation ! "

He turned to leave ; Jeanne de Brissac, who had

moved away to show her contempt of his words, stood near the door, defying him with furious eyes.

She did not make way for him, and he spoke to her with words of rebuke.

"Put off those stolen gems before thou leavest Florence," he said, "lest they prove a weight to drag thee to perdition."

Pale with rage she faced him.

"Who is it bids us leave Florence?" she demanded.

"Girolamo Savonarola, woman!" he answered haughtily. "Girolamo Savonarola!"

Her insolence quailed before the expression of power he turned on her, an expression touching the supernatural.

Charles called to her to be silent, and she fell back from before the door.

Savonarola passed out of the palace; all those whom he passed hated him for his interference, but none of them dared to greet him other than respectfully.

He returned directly to the convent; on his way he glanced up at the closed windows of the empty palace of Pico della Mirandola and his harsh expression softened.

In the bare cloister of San Marco a novice was drawing water from the well; his hands and bare feet were red with cold, a rough white apron was tucked round his girdle; on his arm was a flat basket filled with winter salad.

At the sound of the Prior's step he lifted his head, revealing the face of Andrea de Salvucci.

"Is it done, father?" he asked.

"I have bidden him leave Florence," replied Savonarola, "and he will go."

Andrea looked awe and wonder; he now completely and passionately believed in Savonarola, whose power was become daily more manifest, and whose prophecies were becoming daily confirmed.

The Prior approached him kindly.

"Last night, my son, I had a dream, nay, a vision. I did see the Conte della Mirandola borne upwards by angels."

Andrea's eyes glistened with pleasure, for the Prior had told him he had had his doubts as to the salvation of the penitent, who had so long hesitated to obey the voice of God and assume the Dominican habit.

"Yea, verily, I saw him," continued Savonarola in a moved tone, "beautiful as he was in life, and I am sure that his soul is now in Purgatory."

"I am happy in that knowledge," replied Andrea. "He was so gentle, so kind, and so wonderful."

The tears shone in the haggard eyes of Fra Girolamo; he had not been unsusceptible to the grace and charm of the young Prince who had died in the full flourish of his youth, and stripped himself of all his worldly gifts to die in penitence.

"And thou?" he asked, turning to the novice, "dost thou find peace here?"

"Father," answered Andrea, "I find peace," he added earnestly, almost passionately, "for now I *believe*."

"All thy doubts, thy hesitations, are now over?"

"All, father."

"And the old temptations?"

"I see them now as thou seest them—learning, beauty, power, but gilded vanities—they tempt me not; I know no joy but in prayer and contemplation." He

lifted his serious pale face and fixed his eyes earnestly on the dark countenance of Savonarola.

" Father, there was a woman whom I once loved and desired, who enshrined for me all beauty and pleasure, and I could not rid myself of her image. Yesterday I passed her in the Borgo Ognisanti, and I looked at her as coldly as I would have looked at a thing of stone."

" My son," said Fra Girolamo, " thou art truly happy, for thou hast conquered the world."

The face of the novice flushed with pleasure ; taking up his bucket, he bent his head to the Prior and returned to the convent on his humble duty.

Savonarola looked with pride at the figure of the young man whom he had changed from a cultured gentleman, full of love for the world, for learning and beauty, into a humble monk who cheerfully performed rough tasks ; he would like to have seen all Florence of the same mind.

Slowly he also entered the convent and mounted to his cell, entering that inner one where Cosimo dei Medici had meditated.

He was sad ; though his prophecies were being fulfilled, though his power was daily becoming greater, though he hoped to see the Church purged and Rome cleansed, still he was sad : he seemed to be walking in a nightmare, no joy ever visited him ; he wondered why God had taken all gladness from him, why his spirit knew such few moments of exaltation, why he could not forget his macerated body which tortured him with aches and pains, and why his sleep was troubled with distorted and hideous dreams.

" Perhaps the angels are forsaking me," he shuddered. " Perhaps my visions have betrayed me ! "

But his terrific pride and mental power sustained him, he drew himself erect in the mean cell as if he challenged even God.

" Nay, I shall triumph, I shall succeed, even I, Girolamo Savonarola ! Girolamo Savonarola ! "

CHAPTER XIII

SPRINGTIME

THROUGH the woods of Vallombrosa wandered Giovanni dei Medici and Fiora dei Visdomini.

They walked through the grove of fir trees that rose above the sanctuary to the highest point of the hill ; the huge trees were nearly as high as the arches of the Duomo, and between their trunks it was nearly as sunless as in the interior of the church. A magnificent silence reigned, broken only by a faint buzz of insects ; on all sides were leaves, leaves of beech, of chestnut, of oak and larch, sweeping up the hillside and down the hillside into the valley in all the splendour of spring blooms.

Where the Cardinal and Fiora walked the trees were all lofty firs, and the earth was carpeted with last year's needles ; here no flowers and no grass grew, but under the neighbouring beeches Fiora had found violets, anemones and cyclamen, mauve, white, and pink, which she had woven into a frail wreath that lightly rested on her loosened curls.

Her pale green gown was scattered with leaves and blossoms embroidered in silk, and the fine folds of the thin stuff floated about her limbs as she walked ; with

her joyous face and erect carriage she seemed a figure of the Spring herself as she stepped lightly through the awakening woods.

Giovanni dei Medici was in secular attire and armed; in his white coat and crimson hose and green cap that concealed the tonsure he looked his true age, and had lost much of the dignity and gravity lent him by his priestly vestments; but his air of calm, of self-reliance, was unchanged; months of exile had not altered his poise, his manner of half-amused contemplation of the world, his good-natured tolerance.

Lately he had been concealed in the convent of the Vallombrosan monks, which, with its reputation for sanctity, its wild, inaccessible position in the Casentino, was not likely to be disturbed by any one searching for the Medici, if indeed such search had not long since been abandoned.

Fiora and her brother were being sheltered by one of the Conti Guidi, an ancient friend of the old gay days in Florence, in a castle hidden in the thick woods of the Consuma, and nearly every day the lady rode over to the sanctuary and met the Cardinal, and the two walked together and talked of love and learning, and art and beauty, and read Plato and Aristotle, Petrarch and Boccaccio and the romances of Luigi Pulci—all things which were dead and forbidden now in the Florence ruled by Savonarola.

Joy and loveliness had been banished with the Medici, the city of flowers and jewels had become the city of dust and ashes; but these two had taken away in their hearts the old splendours, and in the virgin woods continued the graces of Lorenzo's court.

The Cardinal smiled at the accounts of Florence the reformed that came to Vallombrosa.

"It is for such a little time," he said. "The friar triumphs only for a moment's space."

And his calm seemed to elevate him into something symbolic of eternal verity, beside which the passion of Fra Girolamo was but ephemeral, like foam beating against a rock.

For Giovanni dei Medici represented natural humanity unchanging and unchangeable.

To-day they stopped before the shrine of San Giovanni Gualberto, who had founded the retreat of the Vallombrosans nearly five hundred years ago. It was a lonely little chapel, with a cross above an open front guarded by a railed gate. Within the gloomy interior a dimly painted altar showed.

Before this burnt a red lamp, and the low marble altar-table was covered with bunches of fading spring flowers.

The pine needles had drifted in on to the floor, and the two steps were covered with moss.

Fiora stood gazing in, half timidly; she seemed like a heathen goddess peeping in at a Christian temple, so in contrast with the gloom and sadness of the little chapel was her fresh, gay loveliness. The Sanctuary itself was out of sight in the hollow, and the spot seemed isolated from the world; higher up in the woods stood a black cross raised by the pious monks to the memory of a lonely traveller found murdered there.

A sudden chill fell over Fiora.

"Supposing it were true!" she whispered. "Supposing Savonarola were right!"

Giovanni smiled without answering.

" Oh, thou ! " cried Fiora, " thou art very secure !—but supposing these holy men were right ? "

" What holy men ? " asked the Cardinal.

" These monks and hermits who renounce the world—men like Savonarola."

" Dost thou call these holy men ? " answered Giovanni. " Dost even thou think misery is goodness, ugliness holiness, and the herding together of idle men in poverty and filth, lamentation and ignorance, truly pleasing to God ? Such beliefs are dark spectres of past ages, my Fiora ; the light of learning hath dispelled them."

" I know—yet sometimes it falls even on me, the dread of happiness lest it mean hell—the fear of the punishment of sin."

" There is no sin in love and beauty and wisdom," smiled the Medici ; " these are the greatest things in the world, nothing shall overcome them, nothing shall dethrone them. Health and sanity are right, not disease and madness—we were no more meant to renounce the world, my Fiora, than to renounce the air we breathe ; it is all there for us to take and enjoy, and only a fool would refuse it."

" So the ancients say," said Fiora, " but the Cross ? "

Giovanni had no answer ; he was a Cardinal and his ambition was to be Pope, even to Fiora dei Visdomini he did not care to say that his belief in the terrible religion he professed was no stronger than that of the Borgia in the God whose vicegerent on earth he claimed to be.

" Leave gloomy thoughts," he said, " and be assured

that if thou art happy and do not harm others God will never harm thee."

"And Savonarola?" asked Fiora.

"Savonarola is mad; he has denied and macerated his body until his mind is unbalanced. He takes the ravings of an epileptic for God's truth, and the crazy dreams of his own starved brain for divine revelations—he is not sane, I say. He is ignorant, and hates knowledge as the bat hates the daylight; he spits at the ray of wisdom which could scatter the dusky cobwebs of his superstition; like the toad buried in the darkness of the ditch, he tries to throw his poison over those who walk in the sun."

Giovanni spoke with a passion unusual to him; his smooth cheek flushed, and his lustrous eyes sparkled behind the dusky lashes.

"Thou dost hate him," said Fiora.

"I have good cause," said Giovanni, and he smiled again; "but apart from personal wrongs I hate him—he is like a curse and a blight over the things I love and admire. My father made Florence beautiful, pleasant, the foremost jewel in Italy, nay in the world, and he has turned into tears and ugliness this fair place."

Fiora seated herself on the mossy steps of the chapel and drew her white fingers through the fine strands of her glittering hair; she told Giovanni that Conte Guidi had been secretly to Florence and was amazed at the change that had taken place.

Savonarola's plan of government had been accepted by the Signoria, and he was now consulted in all things, and his sermons had become the guide of the government and the daily conduct of the citizens, so tremen-

dous grew his prestige after the verification of his prophecies, and after he had proved himself to be the only man who could induce Charles to enter Florence peaceably, and the only man who could induce him to depart. Under his influence everything was changed; even the Carnival, which under the Medici had resembled a heathen orgy, was now the occasion for a fervent display of religious enthusiasm.

The very children who had played all manner of wanton games during the festivals, now went abroad singing holy hymns and carrying crucifixes.

And Savonarola was purging the city of vanities; instead of the usual Carnival bonfires of crackers and masks, he burned rich dresses, costly tapestries, pictures, statues, wigs, paints, books and manuscripts, all those objects that had been the delight of the Medici, and which now were being surrendered by the repentant Florentines.

Even Messere Sandro di Botticelli, the painter of the beautiful Venus rising from the waves in the Medicean villa at Cainio Poggio, had fallen under the spell of the friar, and had burnt all his paintings and drawings.

"Savonarola is a great man," concluded Fiora, "to so turn the minds of people."

"It is a devilish greatness," said Giovanni, "and it is a greatness for which he will dearly pay; for a while he may make Florence as mad as himself—for a while only!

"It is we who are immortal," he added, with a smile, "we who shall outlive Fra Girolamo and all his dismal doctrines. Men such as he are but clouds before the sun; for a short space they obscure the light, then they

are dispersed by the fire they would conceal, and leave no trace behind."

"I would that it were over," said Fiora wistfully. "I would that the old days could come again!"

"We will find the old days elsewhere, Fiora; I am tired of hiding here—we will leave the Casentino."

"Would you go to Rome?"

"Where Piero eats the husks of charity at the Borgia's footstool? Nay, it is in another guise that I would go to Rome."

And the young priest's eyes hardened with a vast and self-confident ambition.

Fiora, with her pretty pretences of poetry and sentiment, seldom spoke on matters practical, but now she felt herself forced to do so.

"Thou dost lack money to go anywhere," she said dolefully.

Giovanni dei Medici admitted that this was true; although the Signoria had promised Charles to refund the confiscated estates when Piero's debts had been paid, it was scarcely likely there would be anything left by the time the creditors of the Magnifico were satisfied. Still the Cardinal believed that he could find money; he had more adherents than his brother, and there were still many who believed in the house of Medici.

"I will go abroad," he said, "to France, to the Low Countries, to the ancient seats of learning."

"Alas!" said Fiora. It was the woman's vague cry of uneasiness before the man's eternal restlessness: the sense that neither she nor the spring woods of Vallombrosa could hold him long struck to her heart; she felt the pleasant hours slipping away almost as quickly

as the delicate flowers withered in the wreath about her hair.

"Wilt thou not stay here, where it is fresh and lovely?" she pleaded.

"I have some while dallied here," he answered, "and I would not be an idler like Piero."

"Poor Piero!" sighed Fiora.

The Cardinal echoed with some contempt, "Poor Piero! by his own fault he lost his heritage, and by his own fault he will never regain it—he stays at Rome, sunk in vice and idleness, making his name despised. Fiora, I should have been the elder brother and he the useless priest."

"Thou art not useless."

"I would have been a warrior—I would have had the chances Piero has had—thinkest thou that I would have wasted them playing *pallone* and riding races?"

"Nay, I think that thou wouldst not," she replied; "even as it is——"

"Even as it is I may do something—but not by lingering in Vallombrosa woods, my Fiora."

She sat silent: the great stillness was almost terrible; through the distant aisles of the trees bars of sunlight gleamed here and there like the glitter of unsheathed swords; the heavens were hidden by the mighty boughs, but all the shadow of the woods was golden with the reflected light of the sky.

In the darkness of the shrine the little lamp gleamed red above the faded offerings of blossoms; a brooding spirit seemed to enfold the altar, the spirit of terror, suffering, and punishment evoked by Savonarola.

"Let us go from here," said Fiora, rising and shaking

the dried fir needles and the dried moss from her green gown.

She put her pale hand within the strong brown fingers of Giovanni dei Medici, and they ascended the slope, looking in their gay dresses no larger than flowers compared with the vast height of the trees.

In silence they made their way between the great trunks until they came to the path that wound down to the lonely Sanctuary.

When they came in sight of the long white building, backed by the wonder of the hills covered in spring leafage, the bronze bell in the little campanile was ringing for midday, and the sun was blazing over the open space in which the convent stood. Standing in the last cool breath of shadow before they stepped into the dazzle of the light, Fiora and Giovanni kissed with a certain sadness.

The fantasy of their relationship, the delicate poetry of Neoplatonism with which they had so skilfully robed themselves, was beginning to fade ; at this moment they felt themselves mere man and woman.

She wished that she had never loved seriously, and he wished that he was free to make her his wife. But both dismissed these wishes as foolishness, and true to their creed vowed to enjoy without regret. Yet they clung a little longer in each other's arms ; their lips trembled a little longer on the kiss, and her eyes were dewed with tears.

Then they parted ; he to return to the Sanctuary, she to mount her white mare and ride away.

And with the noonday the mystic silence deepened in Vallombrosa, every leaf seemed asleep ; yet with every

moment the promise of the spring intensified, the sense of luxuriant blooming life grew stronger as bud and blossom opened to the sun.

Only in the Christian shrine of the long dead hermit who had denied love and beauty and hated the world was there gloom and sadness, and the light of the red lamp glowing above the dark seemed evil in the silent joyousness of the wood.

And evil seemed the black cross, symbol of sin and pain, rising above the grave of the unknown murdered man—an affront to the woods and to the spring.

CHAPTER XIV

"TU HAI VINTO, O CRISTO GALILEO!"

SAVONAROLA marched at the head of the citizens of Florence towards the Piazza della Signoria.

He wore a long white robe, already slightly stained at the edge by the dust of the street, and before him was carried, as a banner, the crucified Christ painted by Fra Angelico.

Behind him came the troop of children he had formed from the idle youth of the city and established as a kind of moral inquisition over the citizens; these holy little ones were also robed in white, and bore in one hand a palm branch and in the other a scarlet cross.

In their midst two elder boys bore an image of the Infant Christ, with one hand raised in blessing, the other pointing to the wound in His side.

Behind these came numerous Florentines, men and women decorously divided into separate groups, all soberly and plainly clad.

The entire company were singing hymns fervently in praise of Christ as King of Florence.

They passed the Medici palace in the Via Larga; the arms had been torn down from above the great gate, and the name Medici was no longer spoken. Piero's two

cousins, Guiliano and Lorenzo, now restored to the city, called themselves Popolani to flatter the once despised multitude.

And yesterday the magnificent palace had been robbed of its final treasures ; a band of Savonarola's children had entered and carried away the few spoils left by the rapacity of the French, books, pictures, statues, tapestries and jewels, with the object of consigning them to the flames with the other vanities of Florence, for this Carnival was the Carnival of Fra Girolamo and the city was mad with fear of God, completely in the hands of the prophet, who was as absolute as ever Lorenzo dei Medici had been in the days of his greatest glory.

On his advice the new Republic had been founded, on his suggestions conducted, by his power and inspiration supported ; the man who had sent Charles and the French soldiery from the city, whose terrible prophecies were every day being verified, was looked upon as the true mouthpiece of God, almost divine.

The party of the Arrabbiati, or Mediceans, still existed, but they had to keep themselves concealed and were powerless to vent their hatred on the friar. For the rest, Florence shuddered with repentance, no one seemed to think of anything but how to escape damnation ; so general was the religious enthusiasm that those who did not share in it escaped to some other town, and Florence became the wonder of Italy, for, from the most wanton, she had become the most fanatic of cities.

And by day Fra Girolamo preached against Rome and sin, and by night he lost himself in an ecstasy of vision and meditation, till it seemed that by sheer force of his

great sincerity and his tremendous ardour he would pull the Borgia down and impose himself on the whole of Italy.

In Florence at least his triumph was complete; the Ferrara friar who had come unknown from Bologna and whose first sermons, a few years ago, had been delivered to empty benches, now bent the entire people to his fierce will and made them with their own hands cast into the flames the vanities they had loved more than God.

As he walked now at the head of the procession his tall figure was erect, despite his sufferings and weakness, and his whole person radiant with a pride little less tremendous than the pride that drove Lucifer to defy God.

A pride justified of itself; for this reformed and abashed city, this solemn procession of repentant people, this band of children eager in holy service, this wanton pagan Carnival of old time transformed into a Christian festival of decorum and pious enthusiasm, were all his —*his* wild dreams made incarnate, *his* midnight visions materialized, *his* lofty hopes realized—all his, *his*, his thoughts made manifest and real!

And his aspiration, always vast, now in this hour of his success became almost boundless; he saw himself the true vicar of Christ on earth, as the Borgia was the false; he saw himself carrying the light and joy of his Master over all the world as he had carried it over Florence; he beheld a vision of the heathen bending before him in Constantinople while he expounded to them the Gospel.

Feeble and half-delirious from self-inflicted sufferings and self-denial that reached starvation, strange figures

danced before his eyes, even as he led the procession through the quiet streets of Florence.

He saw the red bull of the Borgia's shield blended with the many-headed beast of the Revelation and Ophio, the heathen god, sent to Lorenzo dei Medici from the East, terrible in granite; he saw the scarlet woman on the scarlet beast, smiling with the childishly fair face of Lucrezia Borgia and surrounded by young men, "princes riding on horses," looking at her with lovers' eyes and yet her brothers; and one was scarlet too, Cæsare, in the robes of a Cardinal.

And towering above all, monstrous and unbelievable, was the figure of the Pope, Roderigo Borgia, Antichrist, in the eyes of Savonarola usurper of the place of God's vicegerent.

All this abomination he beheld being swept away and cast into the nethermost pit, and Rome purified as Florence had been purified, by the descent of armies, the horrors of fire and the sword.

And it was his own figure he saw mounted on the ruins, supported by the hands of God and wielding the awful power of the crystal sword of prophecy and judgment.

When the procession reached the Piazza della Signoria they found a vast crowd awaiting them, the bonfire of the vanities ready in the centre of the square, and the Signoria in their long grave red robes, standing in a group on the Ringheria of the Palazzo, for Savonarola's position in Florence was now as officially recognized and as curiously undefined as once had been Lorenzo dei Medici's; as the merchant had been absolute tyrant of the city, imposing his will on all, making the name of Medici one with that of Florence abroad, and treated

as the equal of princes and even kings, yet without title or designation, so now in the same way the monk ruled Florence, in name Prior of San Marco, in reality the ruler of the city, the guiding spirit of her councils.

Savonarola, accompanied by Fra Domenico and Fra Silvestro, took up his position in the Loggia dei Priori; among the persons of position and consideration near them were Cristofano and his wife.

Aprilis looked with intense curiosity at the monk, to whom she had not been so near since he repulsed her fervour in the convent cloister.

His ill-shapen face was more than ever haggard and distorted with disease and suffering, the fierceness and power of his restless eyes had intensified. The whole spiritual dominance of the man, authoritative, fanatic, impassioned and terribly sincere, was more than ever tremendous, more than ever something supernatural, abnormal, of that terror and grandeur that might be either God or Devil, but was certainly above ordinary humanity.

Aprilis wondered if anything could make this man's iron strength flinch, if anything could shake his faith, his belief in himself and in his mission, if anything could divert the adamantine singleness of his purpose, the inflexible resolution of his might.

She thought in the whole world there could be nothing, and she shuddered before him as before the unchanging image of the Almighty.

Aprilis no longer looked for happiness, the thought of it even made her afraid—it seemed to her a temptation to be dreaded and avoided; she hoped that she might never be happy again, so as to offend God the less and make some expiation for the past.

And it did not seem possible to her that she could ever again be joyous or find pleasure in gay things, so keenly had the sorrows of the world entered into her heart.

She looked round the crowd waiting with pale expectant faces for their prophet, and found only sadness, only the pitiful and the dreadful—in the haggard mother too worn with toil to take any delight in the children at her side; in the children themselves, sharp, precocious, already in arms against the world; in the young man and woman too seared with poverty to find any wonder in each other; in the old man trembling and incapable, but still burdened with work; in the prosperous citizen gross and blinded, who had thought of nothing but his own interests all his days; in the beggar, making a trade of his deformity; in the diseased and ailing, so hideous, so unwanted, yet clinging desperately to life; in the ugly complacency of the well-placed woman, indifferent, selfish—all, like the figures of a nightmare, showed to Aprilis clearly in their pitifulness and their hideousness.

Yet these were the elect, the saved; in their gleaming eyes, from which the overwrought spirit shone, in their trembling lips and shaking hands, Aprilis saw that, despite their suffering and their sins, they *believed* and so were saved.

"Of such are the kingdom of heaven," and the Medici and the old splendour and beauty and laughter and order and comeliness were of hell.

"Surely I am saved," thought Aprilis in an agony. "I am saved—in time I repented."

And in her spirit she abased herself before these poor people, who had scarcely come as near deadly sin as

she had, who at least had toiled when she had been idle, and wept when she had laughed, and suffered when she had been at ease.

The hair of Aprilis was no longer gilded, but a pale and natural brown; her cheeks and lips were no longer tinted; fatigue and thought had shadowed her eyes; her dress was no more cunningly chosen to set off her slender figure; she no longer wore the *ferroniera* hanging on her forehead, or plucked out her eyebrows to give that faint line, so fashionable; yet she was ashamed of her white fine flesh, of her clean gown, of the little luxury still left her; she wanted to further humiliate herself, to macerate her body, to lower herself to the level of the lowest, of the humblest here, to seek out in disease and rags and filth the salvation that Savonarola preached.

Her one attempt at self-torture brought the blood to her cheeks in the remembrance.

She had procured a hair shirt from a nun who came begging for the poor, and for one day she had worn it, finding pleasure in the hideous fret against her tender body.

But she had forgotten that she now no longer belonged to herself—that she was the wife of Cristofano.

In the fierce scene that followed his discovery of her action she learnt with terror what pride of possession his silence towards her covered, how he valued her beauty, and how unbendingly he maintained his authority.

She was his wife and property—this attitude he had boldly maintained, and Aprilis, remembering the words with which Savonarola had once dismissed her, submitted anew.

Not without a fierce inward struggle, not without

shame and bitterness, not without being further alienated from the man who was her master !

A flaming torch was set to the bonfire of vanities ; several members of the crowd came forward and flung articles into the soaring fire, and bands of Fra Girolamo's holy children who had been collecting vain and frivolous objects from the houses and from passers-by arrived with baskets full of books, toys, Carnival masks, bottles of perfume, false hair, jewellery, pictures and balls, rackets and jockey's livery.

The spring freshness of the air became fouled with the thick, slow-moving smoke which like a heavy veil began to envelop the pile ; through the vapour glittered the pretty silk masks and baubles of Carnival, the ivory and ebony of boxes and cases, the bright colours of enamel and lacquer, the soft dyes of silks and velvets, the glitter of gold and silver embroidery, the glowing tints of pictures, the rich tones of books, and here and there the sparkle of some precious metal showed through the curling vapour.

The people joined hands, and as in the old days of Carnival began to dance round the pile ; but instead of chanting the profane songs of Lorenzo dei Medici they were singing lauds and hymns. The Dominicans moved forward, and forming another and larger circle, began a second rhythmic movement.

Aprilis noted their dirty robes, their limbs twisted with toil, their faces emaciated and fervent, yet often low and brutal, diseased or stupid in formation.

Among them she saw Andrea de Salvucci ; ill living had coarsened his face yet made it pallid, his shoulders stooped, his hands were soiled and rough, his feet showed

discoloured and sore in the worn sandals, his hair hung damp and lifeless, and in his eyes gleamed an unbalanced enthusiasm.

He had lost all his attractiveness, and Aprilis could not repress a shudder; she compared this follower of Savonarola with her husband, so charming in his comely elegance, in his composure, in the finish of his manners and his dress, perfect in all things, pleasing to the senses, and for a moment the old spirit rose in her, repelling her from Andrea and attracting her to Cristofano.

But she repressed it, and the sensation passed as quickly as a waft of perfume in a barren place. As the flames mounted round the gay pyre the crowd danced faster and faster; the hymns they sang were set to one of the old Carnival tunes, and the old enchantment of the swift, passionate music exerted the old magic. A frenzy began to seize the enthusiasts; Aprilis heard the word "Cristo! Cristo!" shouted again and again in tones of mad supplication and excitement.

She looked at her husband, who had neither accepted nor rejected Christ; who was neither with the Medici nor with Savonarola, but who pursued his own ends uninfluenced by either.

His seemed the one calm countenance in the crowd, for even the Signoria were swayed by the general intoxication of religious fervour.

He smiled down into the wondering, white face turned up to him.

"Note yon picture still untouched," he said. "It is the portrait the Conte della Mirandola used to have in his chamber. Strange to think he loved that lady once."

Aprilis glanced up at the picture, from which the serene

and wistful features of a lady of Milan gazed at the approaching flames.

" I would have saved it," added Cristofano. " It is the work of the Duke of Milan's mathematician, Messere da Vinci."

" He is a wizard, some say Antichrist ! " cried Aprilis. " He is trying to make wings for man ! "

" What didst thou with his flying toy ? " asked her husband.

Aprilis was silent. She had destroyed the thing, which seemed to her devilish ; but in her heart she was sorry, for it had been like destroying life.

Cristofano divined the meaning of her silence, and laughed.

" Messere da Vinci is one of the greatest men in the world ; though I held speech with him but once I know that," he said.

Still Aprilis did not answer ; she was watching the dance, growing wilder and wilder. Monks and people together shrieked out the name of their God ; some tripped and fell, and were allowed to lie. Fra Silvestro was striking himself on the brow with his crucifix, and the blood streamed down his distorted face.

The laugh of Cristofano goaded Aprilis ; she must fathom his attitude.

" Canst thou not *understand* this ? " she asked passionately.

" I can understand Christ and Antichrist," he replied, " and the universal power that moves all to harmony and guides man through such storms as these to eternal stillness."

" Dost thou give this so little importance ? " asked

Aprilis, pointing to the multitude on the piazza swayed by one common emotion.

"Lucretius describes a battle," said Cristofano, "a great battle in which hundreds were slain, full of sound and terror, fury and movement, yet viewed from a distance it appeared but a motionless glitter on the plain—a thing of no meaning. So shall this appear in time to come, when neither the name of Medici nor Savonarola shall stir men even to curiosity."

Aprilis drew away from him; she longed to be one with the dancers below, longed to cry out the name of Christ, to tear her garments in an excess of penitence.

The frenzy increased; it seemed as if each man expected the earth to open, the skies to split before the crack of judgment trumpets, and the Avenging Angel to come striding over the Florentine hills with the flaming sword in his hand.

"Save us! O Love! O Lord! Save! Forgive! Remove from us Thy wrath! Accept our penitence! O Cristo! O Love!"

Many women fainted; a monk fell in a frenzy, others foamed at the mouth and rolled their eyes like creatures possessed.

The scene became a whirling confusion of sound and fury. Aprilis stretched forth her hands, and the tears gushed from her eyes, and she also cried aloud, "O Cristo! Save us, accept our repentance!"

Cristofano looked at her calmly; in a low voice he quoted the words Lorenzo dei Medici put into the mouth of the dying Julian in the miracle play:

"*Tu hai vinto, O Cristo Galileo!*"

BOOK THIRD

THE CARNIVAL OF FATE

" If I am deceived, Christ, Thou hast deceived me, Thou. Holy Trinity, if I am deceived, Thou hast deceived me. Angelo, if I am deceived, ye have deceived me. Saints of Paradise, if I am deceived, ye have deceived me."—LAST SERMONS OF SAVONAROLA, *March* 17, 1498.

CHAPTER I

"A BROKEN TOOL"

In the spring that had seen Piero dei Medici's desperate and futile attempt to storm Florence, over which city fears and misfortunes seemed to brood like clouds and mists of winter, Olimpia da Sansovino wrote to Astorre della Gherardesca to say that her husband had died in his castle near Pisa.

Astorre had not seen her since that day when, frightened by Savonarola's words, she had refused to fly to Florence with him, and on the release of her husband by the Pisans he had taken her away to his lonely villa in the hills, declining to return to a Florence from which the Medici had been deposed.

But through the interval of separation and silence Astorre had still loved the lady, and in his fashion been faithful to her. Memory, the afterglow of a great passion, had survived her desertion ; he had seen no other woman whom he could compare with Olimpia, and her letter at once revived the old love in all its fierceness and power.

He made preparations for his wedding and set out across the war-ravaged country, beyond the rebellious town of Pisa, to fetch the bride.

The Conte della Gherardesca was now one of the Council of Eighty in the new Government of Florence, founded after the model of Venice and largely inspired and directed by the Prior of San Marco, and he hoped for a larger honour, viz. to become, at the next elections, Gonfaloniere of the city.

His rival in this ambition was the man whom he had more than disliked and who affected to despise him, but who was bound to him by the mutual interest they felt in supporting the same policy ; both were Piagnoni and utterly opposed to the Arrabbiati, the Compagnacci, and the Palleschi, as the adherents of the Medici and the enemies of Savonarola were severally termed. This man was Cristofano degli Albizzi, also a member of the Council of Eighty, in whom the supreme authority of administration was vested, and by reason of his greater ambition, charm and gifts, a person of more importance in the city than was the Gherardesca.

This summer evening he was riding with Aprilis near the Porta Prato when Astorre entered the city, proudly escorted and accompanied by Madonna Olimpia in a carriage drawn by white mules. The two men saluted, and Aprilis looked at the carriage, the curtains of which were drawn, while Madonna Olimpia gazed out at Florence.

Her face, so delicate and pale that it seemed formed of dusks and pearly shadows, was sad and wistful ; in this moment of her triumphant reunion with her lover she remembered the warning of Savonarola and his stern words which had threatened a curse if Astorre brought her to Florence.

And though her husband was now dead she recalled

this tremblingly, and as she entered the gates of the city she was wan, as if she passed through the portals of a tomb.

Her wide, dark, and troubled eyes rested on the figure of Aprilis, whose mule was close to the carriage, and she envied this stranger who was so secure and so respected in her own town, riding with her own lord.

She could not know that this was the woman to whom Astorre had been betrothed, but Aprilis had heard of her coming and knew that this must be the Olimpia whom the Gherardesca loved, and she recalled the night when Piero dei Medici had quoted the lady's name—"He loves the wife of Sansovino of Pisa."

The carriage passed on, the Conte riding ahead a little defiantly. His dark keen face had hardened on meeting Cristofano's smile; he too was facing fear for the sake of love, for he also was in awe of Savonarola.

Cristofano turned to his wife, the smile still lingering on his face, which of late had grown firmer, more composed, and authoritative in expression.

"Will this please Fra Girolamo?" he said. "The Gherardesca loses all chance of the Gonfaloniereship by bringing this woman into Florence."

Aprilis did not answer; she was envying Olimpia as Olimpia had envied her; in the proud way Astorre brought her openly to his home she saw only the triumph of love.

"The Gherardesca," added Cristofano quietly, "commits many errors against his own advantage—and he has a strange taste in women."

He looked straightly at Aprilis, and she knew that he referred to Astorre's abandonment of herself and all that

old humiliation, and that he put Astorre in the wrong and exalted her, for the words were more than compliment in their warmth and strength, and coming after so long a silence as to the past they confused and overwhelmed her.

"Madonna Olimpia is very beautiful," she answered hastily. "I saw her face at the window even now."

And she touched up her mule.

"Beautiful, perhaps," said Cristofano.

They rode side by side to the Albizzi palace, for the summer was yet early and the days tolerable in the city.

Cristofano lived modestly, as befitted a follower of the new Republic, but he was now a wealthy man, for Ser Rosario was dead, and the entire fortune of the money-lender was in the hands of the husband of his only child.

To-day Cristofano did not dismount, but watched Aprilis slowly and thoughtfully pass into the shadow of the loggia until her pale red dress was lost in the gloom; then, after seeing the foot-boy lead away her mule, he turned and rode back to the Via Larga, past the execrated and deserted palace of the Medici, past the empty house where Pico della Mirandola had died, past the mansion of Ser Rosario, which was now in the hands of strangers, and to the little square where the church and convent of San Marco stood.

It was Fra Nicodemo, who in the world had been Andrea de Salvucci, who admitted him. Cristofano would have saluted his one-time friend, but the young monk affected not to know him, and instantly led the way to the Prior's cell, giving no time for speech. He looked ill and suffering, his shoulders were bent under

the weight of the heavy robe, and his step had lost all vigour.

Cristofano thought of their former friendship and of the talk they had had on the heights above Florence; he was curious as to Andrea.

"Is he happy? Does he believe?"

The pale and slightly sullen face of the friar gave no answer to these questions; Cristofano could only marvel.

Andrea opened the door of the Prior's cell and quickly returned down the long corridor, lined by other cells, many of which stood open and showed the pale grace of a painting by Fra Angelico da Fiesole on the walls; save for the quick shuffling sound of the monk's sandalled feet the convent was in complete silence as Cristofano entered the presence of Savonarola.

The Prior was seated in the outer cell before the window which looked on the piazza; he was engaged in writing his book, *Crucis Triumphalis*, in which he was incorporating many of his teachings, visions, and prophecies. Of late he had mingled very little in political or indeed any worldly affairs, devoting himself entirely to his meditations, his writings, and his sermons; yet it was known that he had lately received, and refused, the offer of a Cardinal's hat as the price of his silence regarding the iniquities of the Roman *Curia*, so that now there was war to the death between him and Roderigo Borgia, who, together with the Duke of Milan, had vowed his destruction. It suited neither Pope nor tyrant that such as Savonarola should have power in Italy; his approaching excommunication was almost certain.

Fra Girolamo looked up with eyes blood-suffused and weary ; his hand trembled slightly as he laid down the quill pen ; his sallow face was pallid, the massive lines of his jaw and malformed mouth were accentuated by his extreme emaciation, so that the whole countenance seemed distorted and even deformed, like a mask coarsely modelled and then pulled awry.

He received Cristofano without warmth but without resentment. The Albizzi had taken some trouble to live according to the manner of reformed Florence, and though the friar doubted his sincerity he had no fault to find with his behaviour ; Savonarola even considered that the young noble who had espoused the popular cause so consistently might be an instrument in the great work of keeping Florence regenerate.

" Father," said Cristofano gently, " you work too hard ; your great labours will shorten your life."

He seated himself on the low stool opposite the monk's desk ; his charming figure in the white cloth and black velvet riding suit, and the cap of clear coloured scarlet, with the heron's feathers, in his hand, showing incongruously against the dull wall of the cell. His handsome, lustrous, and unvexed eyes gazed calmly at the shadowed countenance of Savonarola.

" My enemies will shorten my life," replied the Prior, and he spoke in a tone of certainty, touched with despair ; Cristofano was startled.

" That is a strange foreboding for you, father, you who are so powerful and have been so successful."

" Have I not prophesied it before ? " cried Savonarola. " Have not both I and Fra Silvestro seen, as in a vision, a desperate and bloody end ? "

And he turned his face, which was working with emotion, abruptly aside.

"Have you already these fears?" asked the Albizzi softly. "Is your dominion over Florence so nearly at an end? Is the holy time so short?"

"I have no fears," said Savonarola; "but the holy time is short indeed, and that great vengeance which I thought to stay with the tears and repentance of this city is near at hand."

Cristofano was silent; his face became keen in expression and he drooped his full lids.

Suddenly Savonarola turned round in the black chair and looked straight at the young man.

"Fears?" he said fiercely; "think you I have fears? If I had been afraid I should not be here now in these poor rags, which I might well have changed for the Cardinal purple! Fears? If I had been afraid I might now be fawning at the Borgia's footstool! You know it well."

"I know well your great courage, father," answered Cristofano. "And when I spoke of fears I meant your fears for Florence."

The monk's face softened.

"Florence?" he repeated; "God knows how I have wept and laboured for Florence! But the time is past, and wrath descends."

It was of the state of Florence Cristofano had come to speak; the city had not been fortunate since the downfall of the Medici, and had not yet paid to the full the price of Piero's submission to the French.

Savonarola's champion, Charles of France, had failed utterly. When the excitement of his first easy success

had passed, and he found himself faced by a formidable league of the Italian princes, he had hastened back to his own country without having redeemed one of his promises to his ally, Florence.

Pisa had not been restored, and the Republic was still engaged in a bloody war with that city. She had lost all her possessions save Livorno, and that was being besieged by the Venetian fleet; Piero de Capponi, her ablest soldier, had fallen in the field; she was racked by dissensions within her walls and tortured by the intrigues of enemies without; the Pope was lending his aid to Piero dei Medici—the whole of Italy seemed to have her hand against the city, once so rich and mighty, now so spoiled and solitary, that Girolamo Savonarola was trying to guide to salvation.

"Wrath descends," repeated the monk, "on Florence, on Rome, on Italy!"

"My business with you, father, was to talk of this," said Cristofano.

Savonarola looked at him keenly.

"Father," added the Albizzi earnestly, "all Italy is against us—the Pope is our bitter enemy. Would it not be well to bend a little?"

"Bend to Rome?" demanded Savonarola.

"Even that—for Rome has the power."

"Nay," replied the monk. "It is I who have the power, the power of God to denounce the sins of the time and the iniquities of the Papal *Curia* which make the Holy See the sink of Christendom."

"Father," asked Cristofano quietly, "will God support you against all the forces of the world? Will He make you triumphant over the Pope and the Duke of

Milan? Will He make your handful victorious against the universe? Methinks He does not do these things."

A terrible look passed over the face of Savonarola; he shuddered and his lips moved convulsively; in that moment Cristofano saw that the prophet was not without his own awful moments of doubt as to the final attainment of his goal.

"Therefore," continued the Albizzi, "is it not better to attain your holy ends by being ductile to the ways of the world?"

"You speak as a blasphemer and a tempter," replied Savonarola, and he spoke with a quiet strange to Cristofano, who had expected violence. "Would you have me think the angels lied to me and that my visions were delusions?"

"Father," said Cristofano gently, "did you not yourself foresee a dismal end?"

"Yea; but first, but first," cried the Prior, "first I should do great things!"

"These you have already accomplished."

"But Rome—Rome!" cried Savonarola passionately. "Does not Rome still flourish in her filth and rottenness?"

"It is beyond human power to cleanse out those Augean stables," replied Cristofano, "and those who attempt it will be but devoured by the monsters therein."

Fra Girolamo was silent; images of wrath and despair floated before his vision—the purple bull of the Borgia, Lucrezia, Cesare, Roderigo himself, all fair, all tainted by the whisper of sin beyond words; their figures whirled before Savonarola like an exultant dance of devils, and an agony that was almost mortal touched

his heart, as if he listened to the pitiless truth in the calm words of this young man—had he been deceived, and was the Borgia to triumph? The effort to repress his weakness cost him a groan; the sweat broke out on his forehead and his limbs shook.

But he answered calmly:

"Since I came to Florence there have come to me those who ask me to moderate my sermons. Did the Council of Eighty send you, Messere?"

"Nay," said Cristofano. "I came because my own wit tells me that if you continue to defy Rome, Rome will crush you, father, and those who follow you."

"I have the people—they too hate Rome."

"Do you count on the people? As they believe in you now so will they disbelieve—unless," he added calmly, "you can show them a miracle, father."

"Have I not said that when the time comes God *will* send a miracle to show I am His prophet?"

But the words did not ring with the old authority and pride; there was rather the sound of a dreadful cry of reproach and agony in them.

"He loses faith," thought Cristofano.

He spoke aloud with more force and decision:

"Father, leave alone the Roman *Curia*—take the hand the Borgia even yet offers; if you do not bend, you will break."

Savonarola looked at him in silence.

"I speak in your interest," continued Cristofano; "because I am your follower I say these things. I see that you cannot stand before what is threatening you—'tis one man before a whirlwind!"

"You do not believe in me," said Savonarola quietly.

Cristofano flushed; the sober truth of the sentence confused him; yet in a way he had believed, and did yet believe, in Fra Girolamo, but not as prophet or vicegerent of God.

"You also want a miracle," added Savonarola, with a ghastly smile. "A miracle! When God Himself was among men did they believe? What miracle would convince such as you? Miracles have happened to me, but can I translate them into the vulgar tongue to be comprehended by all? What I have seen I have seen, what I know I know; it is impossible that I should be deceived, since angels cannot lie. And wherefore speculate whether or no I am a true prophet! Time will reveal this—if what I have said be not truly of Heaven, surely it shall soon be proved."

"Father, I spoke for your own good and safety," said Cristofano, rising. "I mix with men and affairs. I know the way the world goes. I warn you Rome will strike, and soon—*unless you propitiate the Pope.*"

"The Pope is a broken tool," answered Savonarola, "and as such must be cast away. That is the truth as I know it, and to the last I will testify to the truth. I have no more to say."

"Nor I, father," returned Cristofano quietly, "save that I am continually at your service, both within the Signoria and in the city."

The Prior made no reply to this, and the young noble kissed his hand and withdrew.

As soon as he was alone Savonarola put aside his manuscript; the mood for writing had gone. He grasped the coarse black rosary that hung at his belt; the force of his nervous fingers crushed the wooden

beads into his flesh; he paced up and down the cell, walking unevenly and swaying to and fro like a man in physical pain. Had he been too confident? *Had* he been deceived? If God *did* forsake him?

He remembered that last cry of Christ on the cross, and unutterable terror rushed over his soul like the onrush of pitchy waters.

"Am *I* forsaken? Am *I* no better than a broken tool?"

CHAPTER II

THE POISON LILIES

THAT year Aprilis moved early to the villa near Santa Margharita al Montici; the heat was exceptional and disease rife in Florence.

Cristofano went every day into the town, and sometimes did not return for a couple of weeks together, save for the visit of an hour or so, and Aprilis found herself leading something the same sort of lonely life as she had led after her marriage while Cristofano was in Milan. She had no friends and few acquaintances; her absorption with the state of her own soul, her sudden revulsion against the world, had left her no heart for such things, nor had Cristofano urged upon her a busy or a luxurious life; simplicity and retirement were the main features of the social order which had replaced that existing under the Medici, and the Albizzi had been content to shape his conduct according to the taste of the times.

Aprilis had still, in her long coffers of carved oak and scented cedarwood, most of the lavish dresses made for her wedding with Astorre della Gherardesca, and still unworn; she no longer thought of them with regret,

but with indifference. If she had not been afraid of attracting her husband's attention she would have sold them and given the proceeds to the hospitals and convents. Never had there been such poverty in Florence, and so little whereby to relieve it ; and Aprilis, despite her father's wealth, had no money at her disposal, and Cristofano had the pagan scorn and disregard of the poor—to him almsgiving was not a sacred thing. " What does it matter if these live or die ? " he said once to Aprilis ; " they are not Florence. We serve the city in other places than her lazar-houses."

But Fra Girolamo sought Christ in the lazar-houses and the gutters of streets so foul that Cristofano would not have entered them. Aprilis would have followed him had she been free.

Aprilis had never been free ; she saw that now with bitter clearness. She had not been free to love because of God, and now she was not free to serve God because of the worldly ties that bound her to a worldly man. Between two truths, the flesh and the spirit, had Aprilis been ground ; she had been the victim of that eternal contention, and stood now robbed of everything—love of God and love of man, joy of heaven and joy of earth.

The great numbness of her soul served her as resignation ; she hardly knew that she suffered. She clung to her belief in Fra Girolamo, the prophet, the miracle-worker, and in this tried to find her salvation and her consolation.

The emptiness of the long days when she was alone she began to fill with dreams, half frightful, half glorious, in which the ecstasy of self-sacrifice seemed blended with the ecstasy of self-fulfilment, and she seemed to

taste in spirit both these things that she had longed for and not known.

She had not heard the name of Piero dei Medici since the utterance of it with derision and contempt at the time of his useless attempt on Florence.

It had not surprised Aprilis that he had failed; she knew that he, like herself, was condemned to always fail, and fail ignobly.

She had heard of his life in Rome, where he was dependent on the charity of his father-in-law, Roberto Orsini, and of his degradation into every manner of idleness and vice, idleness that was no longer excused by a secure and splendid situation, and vice that was no longer redeemed from sordidness by the magnificence of wealth and the grace of culture.

There was nothing now to either love or admire in Piero dei Medici; but Aprilis thought of him as one, like herself, supremely unfortunate, not wicked . . . he remained to her, even in her apathy, the man she had loved—a love that had been ennobled by an utter renunciation, a complete surrender.

In a corner of the flagged terrace before the Villa degli Albizzi grew some strange lilies Aprilis had not noticed till this spring.

She saw the plant first as a short mottled stem of dull brown and white, which presently broke into a crown of leaves, which grew in thirteens together, the dark green being flecked with white like foam stains.

And as the spring wore on the flower appeared—a pointed lily, an arm's length in height, with a great shining pod as tongue, fleshy in substance, and of the darkest crimson, like black veiled with red. Five of

these flowers bloomed in the corner of the terrace, opening in a night from dark scrolls to huge trumpets that flaunted sombrely among the curious snakelike mottled green.

Aprilis likened them to the lilies of Florence, Florence in Medicean times, rich, magnificent and strange, splendid with the splendid colour of worldliness, luxury, and perhaps of crime—perhaps of sin, of deadly sin.

The flowers fascinated her; the first day of their opening they became companions to her in her loneliness, reminding her of the old days, of Fiora dei Visdomini, of the young Cardinal, of the man in the wolf-mask, of the gorgeous apartments in Cafaggiuolo and the song of Lorenzo :—

"Di doman non c'è certezza."

They stood screened by an oleander tree, yet only covered by the grey-green foliage, and Aprilis thought that, in the neglected garden, no one had noticed them in their secure place against the corner of the terrace wall.

The peasants' labour was all for the fields, the vines, the olives, the grain, and the fruit trees, and the few flowers on the terrace and round the house had little attention beyond what Aprilis herself could give them.

So the strange lilies of which she did not know the name remained her own secret, she thought, and she was glad of it, yet afraid too, for the things of which they reminded her were things she had hoped to forget, things that she thought she had indeed forgotten.

That night of the first blooming a great restlessness came upon Aprilis—she could not find quiet in the well-

ordered rooms lit by the steady yellow oil-lamps nor in the little chapel where the mystic red light burned before the simple altar. To-night the two Madonnas, the blonde Mary in the white silk dress and the black-haired Mary in the azure robe adorned with silver, brought no comfort, nor did the atmosphere of the place, heavy with the smell of old incense, old wax, and sweet oil.

Aprilis wandered from the chapel, across the empty courtyard where the vine was beginning to throw out long tendrils, and the moonlight fell across the red-tiled roofs on to the well with its graceful iron bucket supports, leaving in darkest shadow the loggia, with the pots of geranium and roses, and entered the house.

She went into her chamber and sat on the step of the bed; the candle she had brought with her was the only illumination; the flickering rays penetrated between the blue taffeta bed curtains and showed the sprig of holy palm stuck above the head-rail, left there by the priest when he blessed the house at Easter, and already withered.

Above it was an image of the Madonna, terra-cotta on a black oak bracket. Aprilis had had much comfort from the placid sweetness of her smile and the gentle resignation of her gesture, as she stood with arms slightly extended, hands outstretched, and head humbly bent, but to-night she seemed only a doll of clay as the two other Madonnas in the chapel had seemed only dolls of wax.

Aprilis found herself thinking of other statues, of other gods, the whiteness of the mutilated figures in the darkness, of the ilex of Lorenzo's garden the first night

she had spoken with Piero dei Medici, the statue in the shadowed alcove of the bathroom of Cafaggiuolo, the smooth-limbed goddess she had seen the angry crowd, urged by the Dominican, breaking to pieces in the torch-lit streets that night she had ridden away from love and sin.

Anxious to be rid of this folly, and torn by the contending thoughts she could neither resist nor overcome, she rose impatiently and again left the house, passing this time down the dark slanting passage which led under the house from the courtyard to the terrace.

She was still in half mourning for her father, and the plain dull green gown of fine texture, without ornament, that hung round her in close, soft plaits, the green-grey veil, edged with silver, which was bound over her hair, concealing the brightness of her waving locks, blended with the misty blue rays of the moonlight, so that she moved like a thing invisible across the terrace to the balustrade covered with ivy and edged with jasmine, iris, rose, basil, and carnation plants.

The jasmine gave forth the elusive sweetness of the perfume of the yet half-opened flowers, and a hidden honeysuckle cast a stronger scent on to the air.

The moon was soaring overhead, and the landscape, hill beyond hill, valley disclosing valley, was fair with the sad unearthly fairness of dreams.

The shapes of the churches and the cypress trees rose up clear, yet faint in the moon mist—all else was vague, indistinguishable, the earth fading into the heavens, and the moon shining under vapour like a crystal light deep drowned in shadowed waters.

The silence was complete, yet seemed full of life;

now and then it was broken by the harsh shriek of an owl rousing its prey.

A slight breeze, blowing low, shook the dry leaves of the olives, and waved the veil back from the face of Aprilis.

Instinctively, yet with a certain reluctance, she turned towards the corner where the secret crimson lilies grew.

As she approached a sudden odour was wafted towards her ; she stopped instantly, for it was the odour of death, of decay, of abomination.

It strengthened, overwhelming the sweetness of honeysuckle and jasmine, then faded away. Aprilis again moved towards the lilies, and as she neared them the hideous smell arose again, turning her sick and faint.

There is death here, she thought, there is something dead hidden in the bushes.

And she approached the clump of lilies as if protection was in their presence.

She could distinctly see the shape of them, flowers and leaves, black in the moonlight ; they seemed rigid, so motionless did the heavy blossoms stand against the breeze.

Aprilis bent towards them ; as she did so, a waft of the poisonous smell came full in her face, like a blow.

She stepped back.

" It is the lilies," she whispered.

Nerving herself to the effort, she stooped again over the dark chalice of the nearest flower.

It was unmistakable, the odour came from the lilies ; deadly, narcotic, hideous, the smell of putrefaction and all things loathsome, it arose like a menace from the

strange, magnificent blossoms which in the daytime had been odourless.

Aprilis hastened and seated herself on the balustrade, shaking in every limb, and staring at the misty landscape.

She was strangely affected by her discovery; she remembered that she had thought these like the lilies of Florence. Was not the symbolism even more complete?—were not the lilies of the city rotten, putrid, giving forth the miasma of death?

So Fra Girolamo had said.

And then she had likened them to Piero dei Medici. Was not the odour like the evil accompanying her thoughts of him—hidden, secret evil that only dared abroad at night?

She covered her face with her hands.

A faint, feminine voice aroused her from her sad absorption.

"Aprilis—Madonna Aprilis."

She looked up, to see another figure, clad in dark garments, and as shadowy as her own, standing a few feet away from her, half in the darkness cast by the lime tree.

"Do not be frightened," continued the stranger. "I found your gate open as I found it once before, and I come at night because I am in hiding. I am Fiora dei Visdomini."

"Fiora!"

Aprilis rose with her heart beating strangely; the appearance of Fiora at this moment seemed marvellous; whether her presence was as a temptation or a consolation she could not tell.

Fiora came and seated herself on the balustrade as she had done, in her beauty and splendour and gaiety, long ago in the sunlight.

Now the shadows wrapped her, yet it was obvious to Aprilis that her attire was plain, and that no jewels glittered on the white neck, nor in the tiny ears, and no diamond or pearl hung on the slender thread that secured the dark veil round the shapely head.

"You in Florence?" whispered Aprilis. "Is it not dangerous? Were you not banished?"

"I told you I was in hiding," replied Fiora, "near here in a peasant's cottage, with Carlo—we have a mission to Florence."

"Why have you come to see me?" asked Aprilis.

It seemed that Fiora laughed.

"Have you forgotten Piero dei Medici?" she said.

Aprilis stood dumb.

"Do you recall my last visit?" added Madonna Fiora.

"Well enough," replied Aprilis.

"He remembers you," said Fiora. "Speaks of you often, thinks of you more often I believe. He is in great humiliation and misery."

"Has he nothing better to think of than me?" exclaimed Aprilis. She sat beside Fiora on the balcony and tightly clasped her hands on her knees.

"I suppose he loved you—perhaps because you were elusive; platonic love was a Medicean fashion after all, was it not?"

"You come at a strange hour, and talk of strange things," murmured Aprilis; in her heart she added, "Why cannot you leave me in peace?"

"I know," answered Fiora, "you are holy now, are

you not—a Piagnone, a follower of Fra Girolamo? But do not deceive yourself, Messere Cristofano follows the prophet for his own ends."

"My faith is not in Cristofano but in Savonarola," said Aprilis in an agitated voice.

"Savonarola has not even faith in himself—he has promised miracles and cannot perform one—he begins to doubt his own mission—he will fail when the supreme moment comes."

To Aprilis the soft voice was the voice of evil whispering temptation out of the darkness, the eviller as it expressed her own secret and awful doubts.

"Are you happy?" asked Fiora. "You should be; you were cautious in choosing the easiest way."

Aprilis turned her head in amazement; this view of her conduct had never before occurred to her; she was dumb before the accusation.

"Was it not easier to remain the honoured wife of a wealthy man in easy safety than to become the companion of a poor discredited exile?"

"You *scorn* me for what I did!" exclaimed Aprilis.

"A little, Madonna, for I think you loved him, and it is a terrible thing to betray Love."

"But God——" stammered Aprilis.

"He is with Love and Beauty and Nature," replied Fiora. "But why should I preach? I only came to tell you he remembered you, and that he bid me say to you, if I should see you in Florence, that, deserted by all, he recalled you with more regret than any——"

"Deserted by all?"

"I think that Carlo and I remain his only friends. The Cardinal is abroad, and so is Guiliano—his wife is

withdrawn into her father's house, and only sees him to reproach him. The Borgia are tired of him. It is said he will join the French as a free lance."

Aprilis was silent; she stared over the landscape, misted now by the tears in her eyes as well as by the blue vapours of the moon.

"I thank you for telling me this," she said at length. "I—I hardly know how to answer. In every way I have been unfortunate. If—if I had had a child it would have been—different—I am so lonely—lonely! It is true that I loved him though I found him worthless. There are some red lilies in the garden—they reminded me of Florence and of him. They opened to-day, and to-night I came to see them. They smell rank, horrible, like death—decay! Is that not true of the Medici?"

"I know your flowers," said Fiora, rising. "We had them in the garden at Fiesole. Medicean blooms! I liken them rather to your hideous monk and all the stagnation of ugliness he has brought on Florence."

Aprilis did not answer. Adjusting her veil, Fiora added quietly that they had come to Florence to try and obtain some of the jewels Giovanni dei Medici had deposited with Savonarola, with which to satisfy the extreme want of Piero and his few followers; then, with a light word of farewell she was gone before Aprilis could detain her, and quickly disappeared, a shadow among shadows.

The next day Cristofano came up to the villa; he brought Aprilis some gilded oranges stuffed with comfits and some lemons painted with silver half-moons.

He talked much of his chances of becoming Gonfaloniere and of the miserable state of the people in the

city ; in the evening he occupied himself in endeavouring to mend the flying toy of Messere Leonardo da Vinci, which he had found broken on a shelf in the chamber of Aprilis.

Afterwards, wandering on the terrace, he smelt the lilies, discovered them, and gave orders for them to be pulled up and burnt.

CHAPTER III

OLIMPIA

A TERRIBLE rumour crept through Florence that the plague was rife round Pisa and Lucca; no strangers were allowed to pass the gates unexamined and all goods coming from the affected districts were destroyed; the war with Pisa wore on wearily, neither side gained any advantage and each suffered almost irreparable damage; the bombardment of Livorno continued, and every day fresh groups of starving peasants from the ravaged districts of Tuscany wandered hopelessly into the already overcrowded town.

No help, no answer ever was forthcoming from Savonarola's champion, Charles of France; he had failed in all his undertakings, and had broken the promises he had sworn to before the high altar of the Duomo.

The Florentines thought of him with rage and hatred, and this could not fail to affect the public opinion of the man who had hailed the King as the "new Cyrus"—the purger and deliverer of Christendom. Men began to ask if the prophet might not prove as false as the hero he had vaunted. The effect of Savonarola's behaviour during the French occupation began to grow faint, and the parties inimical to him, the Palleschi, the Arrabbiati,

and Compagnacci, became more numerous and stronger in Florence, and among the common people his influence had begun slightly to wane. There was wonder that he did not perform some miracle to testify to his Divine support ; there was secret and growing terror of Rome—it had been whispered the Pope might lay Florence under an interdict. On Savonarola the blow had already fallen ; he was excommunicate, and the Papal bull had been solemnly published in the principal church of Florence. But so far the Prior and the people alike ignored the thunders of Rome ; he continued to preach and they to listen, and the Signoria protected him and laboured their utmost to have the ban removed. And the monk still remained the dominant figure in the city ; the people still wore the garb of penitence he had prescribed for them ; there were still greater crowds to hear his sermons than the Duomo would hold ; the burning of the vanities took place with the same pomp and enthusiasm as at first.

But men like Cristofano degli Albizzi and most of those in the inner circle of the city's politics knew that the position of the friar was difficult and perilous in the extreme, especially since he had refused to accept the bull of excommunication, and, while continuing to express his absolute devotion to the Roman Catholic Church, had inveighed more fiercely than ever against the sins of the Papal Court and the iniquities of the Borgia, which had lately been made more hideous by a crime that was awful in the eyes of even careless men.

Cesare, late Cardinal at Valencia, had murdered his brother, Francesco, Duke of Gandia, in a fit of jealous fury.

The name of Lucrezia was breathed in connection with the crime, the motive of it one supposed to be too horrible for speech.

Even the Pope had been horrorstruck and had shown some signs of penitence for his own sins, but Cesare remained fearless and unmoved. Savonarola had been thrown into a fury of disgust and wrath at this new abomination; the excommunicate friar wrote a letter to the Pope exhorting him to repentance, and his every sermon was a peal of angry, thunderous denunciation against the Borgia.

Men trembled for Fra Girolamo when Roderigo Borgia should rouse himself from his short mood of grief and remorse; he had in store a more terrible weapon than excommunication—an interdict on Florence.

Cristofano degli Albizzi received secret and certain news from Milan that Ludovico Sforza, leagued now with most of the other Italian potentates against France, was meditating, with his usual secret craftiness, the destruction of France's one remaining ally, the new Republic of Florence, that is to say, the destruction of Savonarola.

Cristofano did not again warn the friar, knowing the uselessness of it, nor did he communicate his news to the Signoria, but he began to cautiously detach himself and his interests from the Piagnoni; his residence in Florence under a Medicean rule would be impossible, but the downfall of Savonarola was not likely to mean the return of Piero, against whom almost all parties were united in mutual hate; and Cristofano was hopeful that if Savonarola fell as the Medici had fallen there might be a free Florence in which he could realize his long and secret

dreams of ambition, of rising to a dominant position in the State and of making his name known in Italy.

Already he stood a good chance of being the next Gonfaloniere, as Astore della Gherardesca had incurred the wrath of Savonarola (and the monk was still all-powerful with the Signoria) by his daring marriage with Olimpia da Sansovino, one of the heroines of the Medicean era, widow of a man who had been an enemy of the new Republic, and to Savonarola type of all that was abominable.

This pleased Cristofano; he felt that Astorre's jeers at his own wedding were avenged. It was now his, not Cristofano's wife who was the talk of Florence; Aprilis had now won the respect of all and none could glance askance at her, while Madonna Olimpia was lightly thought of and her name mentioned contemptuously.

The two women met at a feast, quiet and simple indeed compared with those of former times, given by the Bargello in honour of his daughter's name-day.

Olimpia recognized in the lady she had seen outside the Porta Prato the woman who had once been the betrothed of her lord; she looked at her without envy, appreciating her quiet fairness. Aprilis's beauty was no longer enhanced by art but rather subdued by her simple dress and manner; Olimpia knew that such a woman could never have pleased Astorre, and there was no jealousy in the half-wistful regards she cast at the wife of the Albizzi.

But Aprilis envied her; envied the look Astorre now and then flashed on her—"No man ever looked at me like that save Piero;" envied the courage with which she had followed love and defied the world; envied

the passion and the faithfulness that had endured and overcome.

Thinking of the moments of joy these two must have in each other, joy all they had dared and suffered must enhance, Aprilis shuddered.

She might have had such moments, had she followed Piero in his misery and shame . . . he would have loved her as Astorre loved Olimpia.

And she thought of Fiora and her calm words of rebuke. Had she only been a coward to fly from so-called sin? Was all her sacrifice, her humility, her abnegation, only the shirking of the hard way and a choosing of the easy, as Fiora had said?

Was she indeed following a false prophet? If she followed the truth why was she not happier, withdrawn into a holy calm?

She envied, too, the serene and unabashed beauty of Olimpia, envied the woman who had never felt her loveliness was useless and a thing to be ashamed of; she envied the rich clothes Olimpia wore so unconsciously —the fine gowns Aprilis owned were still shut away in coffers and presses, she dare not wear them for fear of the Hell of Savonarola, but she was envious of the woman who did dare.

After the supper was over Aprilis was sitting in the seat of one of the double-arched windows of the chamber, her head resting against the slender dividing column of white marble; she looked down into the narrow Via del Palagio della Podesta, which was dark and silent.

It was very hot and the chamber close and airless. Aprilis felt her head heavy and her limbs languid; she held an orange stuffed with spices Cristofano had given

her as a preventive against the illness so prevalent in Florence.

Presently, to her surprise, Madonna Olimpia approached her; Aprilis made way for her on the narrow seat in silence.

"It is very hot in Florence," said Olimpia; she looked ill, and there was a note almost of appeal in her voice.

"You must miss the country air; you should go up into the hills for the summer, the town is impossible," replied Aprilis.

"This palace, how airless it is!" murmured Olimpia; "it is a prison, is it not?"

"Yes," said Aprilis, "there is a prison here, at the back."

"Where they torture people?"

"Yes—why do you ask?"

"I do not know; the air seems full of groans and cries and ill-omened gloom. I would not care to live here to be the Bargello's wife."

"It is a sad and sombre house," agreed Aprilis; "but now there are few prisoners."

Olimpia was silent, and Aprilis looked at her intently; the dull yellow of her velvet gown was ornamented on the breast with a red amber cross, a large pearl hung from the gold thread holding the light gauze veil round her waving black hair; her face, unusually pallid to-night, and greatly shadowed under the lustrous dark hair, had more than ever that same shadowed look, as of twilight and moonlight, which Leonardo da Vinci gave to his portraits and his Madonnas.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, when she had been for

some time mute, " do you believe in Fra Girolamo Savonarola ? "

Aprilis shivered : the question seemed like a knife thrust at her doubting heart.

But she answered quietly :

" I have been a follower of his since the Medici fell."

" But do you *believe* in him ? " insisted Olimpia ; and Aprilis remembered how she once had forced Cristofano on this question.

" Yes, I believe in him," she replied.

It was Olimpia who shivered now.

" He has put a curse on me and on my marriage ! " she whispered in a broken voice.

" Fra Girolamo would not curse you, Madonna," said Aprilis gently.

" His wrath amounts to a curse ; he says my coming will bring disaster on Florence—he is terrible."

" Yes, he is terrible," admitted Aprilis, thinking how he had altered her life. " And you," she added curiously, " are you afraid of him ? "

" Afraid ? " echoed Olimpia.

" Afraid of what he says—of what he teaches—afraid enough to alter your life according to what he says, Madonna."

Olimpia's dusky eyes looked at her straightly.

" Afraid enough to leave Astorre, you mean ? " she asked quietly.

That was what Aprilis meant ; she coloured faintly and was silent ; she had not been able to resist questioning what another woman's courage was in a situation such as had once been hers ; she put herself in the place

of Olimpia and Piero dei Medici in the place of Astorre della Gherardesca.

" I am not afraid in that way," added the Pisan lady. " Nothing could make me."

" Not even God ? " asked Aprilis eagerly.

" Not even God," replied Olimpia. " As long as my love and lord will tolerate me I will stay with him through any shame, any degradation, any punishment."

On the night she had ridden from the Porta San Gallo to Cafaggiuolo, in her heart Aprilis had said the same, and a few hours later had fled—driven by a picture of the Virgin and the memory of Girolamo Savonarola.

She wondered at herself now ; the eternal wonder of the soul at its own actions, at its own standard of right and wrong.

And she looked at Olimpia with a yet greater envy—the envy of the one who has not dared for the one who has.

Olimpia was unconscious of this ; she thought that she saw only pity and judgment in the pure, sweet, slightly cold features of Aprilis, and she believed she spoke with a woman who all her life had been blameless of temptation and even the knowledge of temptation.

" Do not think, Madonna," she said, " that I am indifferent to the—things Savonarola holds holy. When I first entered Florence I encountered you, not knowing you, and I felt strangely jealous of your placement and respect, being aware that, in this changed Florence, you would be praised where I should be scorned."

A quick flush of surprise passed over the other's face —she realized how strange, how false an impression she made on others, and she felt a shock, like shame.

"But now," added Olimpia, "that weakness has passed. Not even your friar can frighten me. Why should I be frightened? What I wanted I had—and I am prepared to pay the price. If I died to-night, I have lived my life and should have no regrets."

"If I died to-night," thought Aprilis, "what could I say? What record have I? Incompleteness, failure, negation."

Olimpia smiled a little.

"I wonder why I speak to you so freely, Aprilis degli Albizzi? We should be enemies, you know—yet I think I could love you."

The words sounded to Aprilis like a lure, a temptation—as the words of Fiora dei Visdomini had sounded when she first came upon the terrace at the Villa Albizzi.

She said nothing and her folded hands did not stir.

"How calm you are!" remarked Olimpia.

"Calm!" repeated Aprilis. She smiled slightly; this then was all the reward she had for her abnegation and containment; people thought her cold, heartless, passionless.

Olimpia rose.

"It must be easy for women like you to follow Savonarola," she murmured wistfully.

Self-revelation, self-betrayal was trembling on the pale lips of Aprilis; she longed to cry out, "You mistake me—you do not know me—I am going to fly to Piero dei Medici, failure of failures, outcast of the outcast, whom I love!"

She rose also, controlling herself, and gave the other woman formal salutations of farewell.

Soon after Madonna Olimpia left with Astorre. He

was on horseback attended by two grooms with torches, she in a cushion-piled litter.

She held the curtains back and looked on to the narrow streets, shadowed by high palaces, through which they passed.

The night seemed as hot as the day ; the white fire of the moon gleamed through the black cypress of terrace and garden and gave no sense of coolness—where the blue light fell between houses and across the street it seemed hot as sunshine ; it was the season of the fire-flies and they sparkled fitfully in every dark street and every garden ; faint, sickly odours rose from the black alleys and lanes ; a slow white mist, miasma from the Maremma, was visible as they neared the Porta San Gallo where the beautiful Gherardesca palace stood surrounded by trees.

As Olimpia descended from the litter, even the red light of the torches could not disguise her paleness. Astorre felt his heart suddenly swerve ; she had the look of a sick woman.

He followed her into the house ; she paused on the unlit terrace overlooking the garden ; the rich colours of her gown were deadened by the moonlight, and her face and throat, framed in the heavy dark hair and the gauzy dark veil, had a spectral look in the white glow.

Beyond the terrace the garden stretched, they seemed far from any city.

Heavy and tall the cypresses rose, one behind the other, into the pale clearness of the midnight sky ; below them were beech and laurel and ilex and palm, which rustled sharply when there seemed to be no breeze.

Below the terrace a great fountain sent up a jet of

water, that falling in the alabaster basin among the flat leaves of water-lilies, sparkled like living pearl.

Olimpia rested her elbow on the balustrade of the terrace and gazed in silence into the intense hush of the garden.

Astorre could not wholly contain his sudden, unreasonable fears.

" Art thou ill, Olimpia ? "

He put out his thin brown hands towards the dark line of her gown.

Her answer came slow and hesitating :

" Ill ? no. I have not been so well this many a long day."

" Florence becomes too hot now—we will go away, into the hills."

" Anywhere," she answered. " I am happy."

He took her hand gently and they stood side by side enwrapped in that lonely moonlight that was more secret than darkness ; it seemed to each that their spirits mingled and that they became as one indeed.

Olimpia was the first to move ; she came closer to her husband and rested her head for a moment on his breast ; but when he would have embraced her she eluded him and begged him to go into the house and bring some water.

" I will stay here on the terrace, where it is cool, a little longer," she said ; and she added earnestly and strangely, " My love ! my love ! thou hast made me happy ! "

He kissed the hand he still held, then hastened to do her bidding.

As soon as he had gone Olimpia leant her whole weight

on the balustrade, and her head sank back against the pillar behind her; she had sent Astorre away because she felt too ill to long disguise her weakness.

The blackness of the trees, the whiteness of the fountain, the blur of the sky where the moon floated swam before her eyes; her body seemed suddenly on fire; she thought horribly of the wrath of Savonarola. . . . With trembling fingers she tried to loosen the lacings of her bodice, for her heart was heaving terribly.

When Astorre returned with crystal beaker and goblet on a silver platter piled with fruit, she was lying full length along the terrace, her hair and veil scattered beneath her, the great pearl of the *ferroniera* lying beside her cheek like a huge tear.

The crystal and fruit fell from his stricken hands, shattering jug and glass on the marble; he fell on his knees beside her; she was livid, her features writhed. He tore open her gown; there on the white flesh was a purple mark like a bruise.

"The plague!" whispered Astorre, "the plague!"

CHAPTER IV

NEWS OF THE MAGNIFICO

When Aprilis heard that Olimpia della Gherardesca had brought the plague to Florence, her already hesitating faith in Savonarola was shaken terribly. Most people took the new horror that had befallen the wretched city as fresh confirmation of all the friar had ever said; another proof that the wrath of God had indeed descended on them. But to Aprilis it was a shock that was almost a revelation, like her shock at seeing the Virgin of the Seven Dolours as she sat by the side of the sleeping Piero dei Medici.

Olimpia was dead, and her words were still strong in Aprilis's ears, as strong as the words of Fiora (who had now completely disappeared), and the speech of both women seemed to have been justified. Was not Florence under Fra Girolamo indeed like the crimson lilies—suddenly festering into death and decay?

Aprilis remembered Florence as it had been under the Medici, so splendid, so pleasant, so safe, so famous and powerful, thronged by the great men of all Italy, a harbourage for all learning, all the arts, producing masterpieces of architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry,

glowing with the glory of the discovery of ancient wisdom and ancient beauty, love and loveliness besought and admired by all men, grace and culture the ambition of all—and now—a miserable city, stripped of her possessions, fallen in her pride, threatened by powerful enemies, tortured by internal dissensions, ruined in prosperity, and finally afflicted by that terror of terrors, the black plague.

Was this High Heaven's reward for following the fierce doctrine preached by the friar of San Marco ?

This the result of all their self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, prayers, fasting, destruction of all that was fair and careless, humiliation in ashes and tears—this, the most awful scourge man could fear !

It seemed to Aprilis rather as if it were the wrath of Heaven directed upon them for their blasphemy against beauty and nature, their exaltation of pain and ugliness.

And Savonarola ?

As yet he had performed no miracle. God had not made him master of the Christian world nor sent him to convert the heathen, as those early golden dreams had foretold ; he could barely hold his place in Florence. The Borgia Pope still continued Lord of the Church ; the Borgia Duke still continued his calm way of ruthless wickedness ; the champion, the second Cyrus, had broken all his promises and had long since retired to Amboise, a discredited, defeated man, fast sinking into idiocy of mind and decay of body.

What had Savonarola done ? Aprilis asked herself the question in desperate sadness, and there was no answer ; his work seemed to be rootless and branchless and amounted to nothing.

He had changed many lives, doubtless, as he had changed hers, diverted them from their goal, their aims, stunted their passions, frightened them into penitence and self-negation, brought them to humbly walk the streets of Florence behind him and to praise God in a delirium of religious joy while what had once been their cherished treasures were burned to ashes.

But was this lasting? Aprilis remembered the words of Cristofano when they had watched the burning of the vanities together, and she had longed to join the frantic circle dancing round the burning pyre.

It seemed now that he was right, that all those lives Savonarola had changed would break the dam of his restrictions, and rushing back to their normal course, sweep away into oblivion the friar and his Florence.

"Had he been a true prophet," said Aprilis, "I should have been happy in following him. But I am not happy. Had his doctrines been truly of Heaven, I should have been happy in obeying them. But I have never been happy, therefore I must have been deceived; I have never been at peace, therefore I must have been deluded. Had I gone with Piero dei Medici, I should have been happier—at least I should have fulfilled myself."

A great restlessness and ill-ease overcame her. She was not personally frightened of the plague, but she loathed and hated the city under this aspect of suffering, terror, and death; the very ribs of the cupola of the Duomo looked like bare white bones bleaching in the heat; the Arno was turbid, sultry yellow-green, the colour of decay; at night white heavy poison-mists filled the whole valley of the Arno; nets had to be drawn closely over every window to keep out the deadly gnats

and flies that swarmed up in clouds from the flat marshes of the Maremma.

Aprilis longed to escape; through the burning days and the burning nights when the moon shone golden over the vapour-filled valleys, and the shriek of the hawk-owl echoed round the villa, she thought of escape.

Escape and Rome!

Rome where Piero was, Rome where love and beauty were still worshipped, Rome the gay and careless and splendid, where the voice of Savonarola could not reach and where there was neither ruin nor plague.

Even the little villa at Santa Margharita was too near the infected city. Cristofano suggested that Aprilis should go to his estate near Lucca; for himself, he must stay. The Gherardesca had abandoned Florence on the day Olimpia was carried away by the Misericordia to be buried without the gates, and Cristofano saw the way open clearly to the goal of his ambition.

He would be Gonfaloniere, and on the downfall of Savonarola, lord of the city; so ran his dreams, and for them he was prepared to risk the plague; he therefore proposed to Aprilis that she should go alone to Lucca.

Aprilis looked at him silently while he made the proposal; she was seated by her spinning-wheel in the large anteroom of her bed-chamber.

A hank of pure flax was on the shuttle; her gown was the same hue, her face pale; she wore no jewels, and her sole adornment was the gold thread that held the ash-coloured veil in place over the fine spirals of her pale hair. Cristofano sat in the window-seat; he wore a robe of a dark purple colour, and passed from one shapely hand to another a lemon stuck close with cloves

and stuffed with some Eastern drug efficacious against the plague.

His hair flowed evenly round his smooth face; no line nor shadow disturbed the contour of his features, which, but for the slight heaviness of jaw and lips, would have been perfect now in the full health and maturity of his manhood.

"Thou wilt be safer at Lucca," he repeated.

Aprilis was still silent. She wondered at his attitude towards her; he asked so little, he left her so much freedom, and yet made her so acutely aware that he was master.

She wondered what he would do if she told him the *truth*—told him of that second visit to Cafaggiuolo and what was in her mind now. She returned his glance and smiled.

"Why should I play this coward's part?" she asked at length. "I ought to do as other ladies do, go into the town and help Fra Girolamo nurse the dying and cover the dead."

"I should not permit it," said Cristofano.

"No?" answered Aprilis; then she added, with a deepening of her smile, "Am I then so precious to thee?"

He regarded her gravely.

"Some day thou mayst know, Aprilis."

"Some day! Always thy speech is of some future time—as if we had not yet begun to live."

"Perhaps we have not. We are both still young. And neither of us has achieved much. My ambitions are yet unsatisfied—and thine? I do think thou hast not found satisfaction yet either, Aprilis."

She flushed as if he had read her heart, and drew

her trembling hands slowly round the creamy swirl of flax.

"Thou knowest little of me," she said, and her eyes flashed through tears.

Cristofano rose.

"To-day I will make all arrangements for thy journey," he said quietly, "and to-morrow thou mayst start. The air grows deadlier with every day."

"Very well, I will go," answered Aprilis, beginning to unwind the flax. "I cannot be more useless in Lucca than I am in Florence."

As she spoke she made the resolution to go not to Lucca, but to Rome.

It was a chance put wonderfully in her way—the long-looked-for escape at length provided. The tears dried in her eyes, which she kept fixed on the flax.

This would be her chance, she repeated to herself; she would have money (her father's money, she quickly justified herself), she would be able to get clear of Florence without exciting suspicion, and once free of Florence she would be able to escape from her escort and set out for Rome.

These wild thoughts so absorbed her that she almost forgot her husband's presence; her bosom heaved, and her eyes turned to the long chests against the wall where the dresses made for her wedding with Astorre della Gherardesca lay between twigs of spices—old now, but still rich, still splendid, never worn. At last they should be worn—in Rome, for the delight of Piero dei Medici.

"I think to be Gonfaloniere in a short while," remarked Cristofano.

Aprilis started—the words were so foreign to her thoughts.

"Ah yes?" she said vaguely.

"The present Gonfaloniere is engaged in a plot to restore the Medici," added Cristofano.

She gave him her full attention now; the blood flooded her face, her right hand mechanically stroked the flax.

"A vast plot, which the conspirators do not know has been discovered. Lamberto dell' Antella betrayed them. Pucci is in it, and Lorenzo Tornabuoni——"

"They! such followers of the friar!" cried Aprilis faintly.

"Many of Savonarola's followers are but his enemies in disguise since he was excommunicated," replied Cristofano quietly. "These are planning to deliver the city to Piero dei Medici and to compass the death of the friar. Behind it is, of course, the Borgia."

"I thought the Pope was full of remorse and quietness since the Duke of Gandia died," faltered Aprilis.

"That mood has passed," smiled Cristofano, "and now he is further enraged against Savonarola for the letter the friar wrote him exhorting him to penitence. The excommunication may take effect at last."

Aprilis tried to keep her mind steady, to strongly face this changed situation.

"And now?—now the plot is discovered?" she asked.

"The conspirators will be arrested in the Signoria's good time—perhaps they will wait until Piero dei Medici's secret entrance into Florence and thus seize even him."

" He—he means to enter Florence ? "

" Secretly—and to rouse the populace by bribes—the Borgia money."

" He would never do it ? " exclaimed Aprilis. " He would never dare ! "

Then she sprang to her feet with a little exclamation, feeling she had betrayed herself.

But Cristofano answered, without taking notice of her emotion :

" Thou dost know him well—he would never dare."

His brown eyes were fixed on her with a smiling look she found almost unbearable ; it was in her mind to shriek out, " What do you know of me ?—what do you know ? Have you told me this because you guessed I meant to go to Rome ? " for sometimes it seemed to her that he possessed the power of reading her soul.

She controlled herself and stood erect, one hand holding the ends of her veil across her heart, as if with that gesture she shrouded her secrets.

" Who else is in this plot ? " she asked.

" Several, as I said : Bernardo del Nero, the Gonfaloniere, Carlo dei Visdomini, and Madonna Fiora, the beloved of Giovanni dei Medici ! "

" They—they were banished ? "

" Yes, but they are lurking somewhere near Florence ; now Antella knows their whereabouts, and keeps the Signoria informed."

A sudden and great rage seized Aprilis.

" Lamberto dell' Antella is a villain, a hideous traitor ! " she cried. " Dear God, what a part he plays ! "

" But for him the Magnifico might again have entered

Florence, and the friar been hanged by the neck over his own funeral pyre," smiled Cristofano.

" The bitter knave ! " said Aprilis.

Cristofano came a step nearer to her ; he was almost laughing.

" Come, thou wouldst not have thy beloved friar endangered ? "

" Let him work the miracle he has always promised," answered Aprilis ; " let him show himself saint and prophet ! "

" Thou too dost begin to doubt ! " said Cristofano.

She turned a little so as to completely face him.

" And thou ? " she asked.

" I feel what I have ever felt for Girolamo Savonarola. I believe what I have ever believed of his doctrines."

" And what part wilt thou play now ? Wilt thou be faithful to him when he begins to be discredited ? "

Cristofano looked stern.

" Be content. I shall not play Antella's part," he replied. " I shall betray no man ; I shall be as faithful to the friar as I have ever been."

" Thy path was always safe," said Aprilis : " neither right nor left, but carefully avoiding extremes."

" He who sits in the middle balances the boat."

" But never guides it ! "

" When I am past the rocks I change places," replied Cristofano.

He looked at the water-clock standing on the black bureau behind his wife.

" I am due to return to Florence," he added. " One word more : Piero di Lorenzo dei Medici is in hiding

somewhere near Florence, even near here, in the Casentino, though, as thou sayst, he will never dare to enter the city."

Aprilis replied to these words as to a challenge, and was prepared to fling the truth at him in return for his answer.

" Why dost thou tell me these things ? " she asked.

He answered calmly :

" To excuse myself that I ask thee to go to Lucca alone, Aprilis."

She was silenced. It would have been a relief to passionately proclaim everything ; his serenity was imposing a restraint on her that was an agony. Through this distress of soul one thing was clear to her : she could not go to Lucca, her fate was bound up in Florence ; here she must stay.

" Cristofano, I cannot go. I am Florentine, it does not please me to leave the city at this moment. I ask thee to let me stay."

To her surprise, he made no demur at this sudden resolution.

" And the plague ? " he asked.

" I may," said Aprilis, " as well die that way as another."

" I will give thee till this evening," returned Cristofano, " to consider of thy decision. If thou wilt stay, I will not force thee to leave."

He smiled, bent his head, and with no further salute left her presence.

The tireless bells of Santa Margharita and San Michele began to ring the Angelus.

Aprilis went into the inner room ; leaning from the

open window and looking to the right, she could see the distant shining country of the Casentino stretching beneath the heights of Vallombrosa.

She looked at this prospect long after Cristofano had ridden away.

CHAPTER V

THE WRATH OF ROME

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA was not frightened by the ban of excommunication laid upon him; as he did not believe the Borgia to be the true vicegerent of Christ, so he did not believe he had the power to cut him off from Christ's Church.

It was a powerful weapon in the hands of his enemies, and rendered more difficult his always dubious position in Florence and Italy, but the friar was indifferent to that: his vast and glorious dreams had not been based on the aid of man, but on the aid of God; all human opposition would be but as a straw against the tide once Heaven spoke for him unmistakably.

And his concern was now more than ever with Heaven and with Heaven alone.

And therein lay his grief and vexation of spirit, and sometimes his despair.

For his visions had ceased; his cell was no longer peopled with angels and holy voices. Since the terrific apparition of the two crosses which had appeared to him shortly before the Pope sent his bribe of the Cardinal's hat, nothing supernatural had come to strengthen

him, God had given no sign that He would protect His prophet.

And Savonarola was abandoned in darkness as Florence was abandoned to the darkness of the plague.

Yet he held firmly to the beliefs so deep-rooted in his being, his belief in his divine mission, the divine light and assistance that had been vouchsafed to him; and his hatred of the world and the wickedness of the world, and of all those things that he regarded as of the Devil, increased until they amounted to a passion that consumed him. He heard of the net enclosing the Medicean conspirators with a pitiless indifference; he made no effort to warn or save them; his compassion and his humanity were for the plague-stricken alleys where the filthy and the diseased gasped out their ignoble lives, and for the lazar-houses where he could bring the light of the cross to dying eyes that had never before known the light of Heaven.

He was much broken in health; his bilious temperament could ill stand the mortifications to which he subjected his body; constant nausea shook him; he was given to fits of giddiness, almost of delirium; his bones were racked with pains, and feebleness so overcame him that at times he could not move.

He did not relax his fastings, his secret penances, his nights of vigil, kneeling on the stone floor of his cell; but he was inwardly tormented with grief that he could not surmount his physical sufferings: he had read of saints and martyrs who had laughed with joy on regarding their own bruised and broken bodies, and had gone as to a wedding feast to the rack, the wheel, the fire.

And Savonarola could not contemplate these things without a shudder of the shrinking flesh. He fiercely envied the support those others had received, and wondered almost bitterly why such support was denied to him—" Have I not travailed, O Lord? Have I not served? Have I not believed? "

On the eve of the discovery of the Medicean conspiracy, or rather the arrest of the conspirators, for the plot had long been known to the Signoria, Savonarola felt more than usually distracted and unnerved; that day, while toiling in the pestilent city, he had heard of the illness, like to be mortal, of Charles of France, the man he had proclaimed as the champion of Christendom, the scourge of the Borgia, the purifier of the Church.

And now Charles was dying miserably at Amboise, having failed in everything, and despised by every one, idiotic in mind, decayed in body, forsaken by his wantons and his priests, and his favourites whom he had raised from ignominy to be the arbitrators of France.

So ended that dream of reviving the glories of Charlemagne, of a conquered Italy, and the heathen East chained and converted.

" It is the Lord's judgment upon him because he turned aside from the task assigned him, and this judgment I foretold," said Savonarola; but secretly he was greatly stricken that his champion had proved a mockery and a scorn.

That evening he went down into the inner cloister. It was the first shadow of twilight; the warmth of early summer was softened by the breeze of evening; the carnations, stocks, honeysuckle, and huge pink roses in the convent garden gave forth a perfume made

pungent by the added odour of herbs, southernwood, rosemary, mint, and citronella.

On the ground beneath the pink rose tree, which was heavy with blossoms larger than two clasped hands, sat Fra Silvestro.

He was rocking his body to and fro after his fashion, and staring up at the roses; his torn and soiled habit fell apart, showing his dirty swollen feet, chafed and coarse, and the broken sandals mended with rope; the black crucifix of his girdle lay on the soft grass, and on the tortured figure of Christ a large gold-and-orange butterfly had alighted. On the circular stone bench in the centre of the little square of garden sat Andrea de Salvucci; he was regarding Fra Silvestro with melancholy and listless eyes. By his side rested the sack and wallet that he had carried with him on his day's journey in search of alms; they bulged with scraps of poor food: the monks received scanty charity in these bitter days.

Savonarola seated himself on the bench. Andrea rose dutifully, but Fra Silvestro did not stir.

The Prior glanced at the product of the day's labour, and asked in a faint voice why it was not taken to the lay brothers in the kitchen.

"Because there is great news, father," replied Andrea. His voice was strange and slightly hoarse; he kept his eyes on Fra Silvestro. "Fra Domenico will tell you on his return from Fiesole; I stayed here awhile to hear it anew from Fra Silvestro."

And with a certain hardness in his look and gesture he stooped to pick up his sacks.

"Stay and tell me this news," said Savonarola; he

pointed to the bench beside him, and Andrea seated himself, gratefully thrusting into the cool grass his tired feet, aching and blistered from the long walking over the cobbled streets of Florence.

"Fra Domenico has promised a miracle, father," he answered abruptly.

Savonarola turned his head sharply; a swift look of horror petrified his countenance, he stared as a man might stare at the sudden opening of hell.

"He has promised the Franciscans to walk through fire," continued Andrea in the same tone,—"has challenged them; and they have taken the challenge."

"Why has Fra Domenico done this without my knowledge?" murmured the Prior; his head drooped on his breast, and he shivered.

"Out of his great love for you, father. You know Fra Mariano and the Franciscans have always been your enemies; Fra Domenico wishes for once and for ever to silence them and prove on which side is God."

Savonarola knew that his fiery, brave, and devoted follower had been engaged in fierce controversy with the Franciscan order, who was directly in league with the Pope and with the Medici, and often had he endeavoured to check the impetuous zeal of his ardent disciple, whose faith and daring were as boundless as his love for his master; but of late the Prior had been absorbed with other matters and had not noticed the progress of Fra Domenico's controversy.

"This is a trick of Fra Mariano," he said. "Nay, a trap set by Rome; they goaded Fra Domenico into this!"

"For weeks they have goaded him," replied Andrea, "and left him no peace, until, in your name, he pro-

mised a miracle. They hope, father, that you will fail and be utterly discredited before Florence."

Fra Girolamo looked at him in silence; his heavy features quivered, and an expression that was both terrible and pitiful darkened his deep-set and blood-shot eyes.

Fra Silvestro suddenly changed his position on the grass, and, crouching like an animal, dragged himself to the Prior's feet.

"In the Piazza della Signoria!" he chuckled. "Fra Domenico will walk through the flames in the piazza where the vanities were burnt! That will be fine sport, better sport! Fra Domenico and the Franciscan in the flames! Good fun for Florence that!"

"Brother, brother," cried Savonarola earnestly, "tell me what enlightenment thou hast had on this matter!"

Maruffi burst out laughing.

"You promised the miracle, father, not I! You said God would help and save us. I never offered to walk through the flames, not I!"

Savonarola reasoned with him in a tone of anguish.

"Sweet and gentle brother, the visions, the visions thou hast had of holy support and encouragement, have they all ceased? Hast thou had no illumination on this matter?"

"I remember no visions," returned Fra Silvestro sullenly. "When I am sick I am a fool and say foolish things, but you are the greater fool to take them for truth! Visions! Visions! Aye, what visions—visions to set the dogs baying!"

And throwing back his head, he imitated the dismal howling of a hound.

The Prior rose in great agitation.

"Do not deny God—do not blaspheme; the visions were from Heaven."

And he turned his burning eyes on Andrea, who was regarding him fixedly and coldly.

"I say they were from Heaven!" he repeated.

"I have never doubted it," replied the young monk, "and now you can prove it on the public piazza, father."

So saying, he took up the day's alms and left the garden.

Almost at the same minute Fra Domenico entered from the cloister of the dead; his strong, eager face was radiant with joy, he hastened with the ardent step of one who brings triumphant tidings, and most lovingly and reverently kissed the Prior's cold hand.

"What hast thou done?" murmured Savonarola. "What hast thou done?"

Fra Domenico drew himself erect; in his eyes was the enthusiasm of the soldier who after many a fierce fight sees a powerful enemy routed at last and completely.

"We will silence them," he said. "Father, once and for ever we will silence them. In the light of the public square it will be demonstrated who is the Lord's prophet, for whom He works miracles."

Savonarola looked keenly into the face of his disciple, in which there was not the least shadow of fear or doubt or hesitation.

"*I* will prove what you are, father," he continued proudly and happily. "When they see me carry the Host unscathed through the flames no one will dare to doubt your glory!"

Savonarola turned abruptly away. Fra Silvestro was still sprawling on the grass, the long blades of which he was pulling up with his half-palsied fingers; he had fallen on an idiotic silence, and his face was contorted with an expression of sick disgust.

"Father," urged Fra Domenico, "are you not glad that I have silenced these children of the Devil, your enemies?"

Savonarola spoke without looking round:

"Is this thing all abroad in Florence?—am I the last to know?"

"It is already known," replied Fra Domenico joyously. "Before I came even to you I waited on the Signoria and asked for an open trial—and they were gracious—all your friends, father—on the public piazza, before the eyes of all men!"

Maruffi looked up and echoed: "On the public piazza—to be burned on the public piazza, before the eyes of all men!"

Savonarola glanced slowly from the radiant face of his one disciple to the mocking, half-idiotic countenance of the other.

"In whose hands am I?" he muttered,—"in the hands of God or Devil, that this has come upon me?"

"There is neither God nor Devil," grinned Fra Silvestro, "only Fate—we are figures in the Carnival of Fate—good Fate, and may be burned on his pile of vanities at the last—eh, Fra Domenico?"

The other monk looked with tender tolerance at the brother he believed to be an inspired though weak instrument, and then turned upon Savonarola his loving

eyes, in which lay the expression of passionate devotion of an animal, affectionate and unreasoning.

"You are troubled, father?" he asked; it never occurred to him that his action could have vexed or disturbed the Prior, for he believed that Savonarola had faith as complete as his own.

Savonarola turned away without a word. The clear twilight was now closing into night; the moon was rising into the square of purple sky above the cloister, which was cut by the dark campanile of the church; the first notes of the bell for the Ave Maria broke the stillness of the convent; the three monks turned towards the entrance to the church.

The Prior was thinking of his last interview with Cristofano degli Albizzi, of the warning the young noble had given him as to Rome and the wrath of Rome.

Rome had struck now in a way far more deadly than before: the bull of excommunication might be defied; public discredit, the loss of the support of Florence, they might not be defied.

Savonarola recalled a letter he had received a few days ago; it had contained an offer from a certain cardinal to remove the ban of excommunication provided his debts were paid; the Prior had friends who would have raised the money gladly, but he had not even troubled to refuse the offer, the letter had been ignored and burnt.

Now he thought of it, reflecting that he had completely cut off all hope of reconciliation, refused, defied, scorned it; if he lost Florence he stood alone indeed.

As he entered the church he was stopped by a woman who had been evidently waiting for him; she rose hastily

from her knees before a side altar near the entrance from the convent, and as soon as she saw the Prior, hurried towards him, putting back her grey veil.

He recognized the wife of the man who had just been in his thoughts, Cristofano degli Albizzi.

"Father," said Aprilis in a quick whisper, "I would speak to you."

He waited in silence; they were alone in the church save for a few peasants kneeling absorbed, and two monks moving noiselessly before the altar.

Aprilis clasped her hands tightly; she trembled and bent as if about to fall on her knees; her face was pale and marked with tears.

"Father," she whispered in a shaking voice, "you are going to perform a miracle! A great miracle, they say!"

"What do you want with me?" asked Savonarola quickly, and made a movement as if to pass on.

"A miracle," answered Aprilis, detaining him by clinging to his sleeve, "perform a miracle in my heart—you have the power, have the mercy."

"What miracle, Madonna?" demanded the Prior. "Are you not a pious, meek, and worthy woman?"

"No," said Aprilis, "in my heart is the desire for sin, the longing for forbidden things, many lusts and prides. I am greatly tempted and like to fall—save me, cast out the devil I have no further power to combat, make me resigned and happy."

She spoke with great rapidity and with terrible agitation. The friar listened with amazement deepening into rage; he answered instantly and in a voice of bitter wrath:

" You too, even you! You who affected holiness—you but a hypocrite! Lord God, by whom am I surrounded! Get you away. I have no cure for your secret sins, no balm for your hidden lusts, no miracle for such as you. Leave me in peace."

Aprilis quietly released his sleeve.

" Would Christ have spoken so? " she asked under her breath.

A terrible expression passed over Savonarola's face.

" Go to Christ," he answered. " I cannot heal you."

Pulling his hood over his face as if to conceal himself from the eyes of men, he passed on; and Aprilis fell back and dropped to her knees again before the side altar, above which was a picture of St. Andrew dying horribly on the reversed cross.

Aprilis fixed her eyes on this image of hideous suffering until the distorted, swollen face of the martyr seemed endowed with movement and to grimace at her with the mockery of sharp disillusionment.

CHAPTER VI

A MIRACLE! A MIRACLE!

APRILIS DEGLI ALBIZZI waited eagerly for the day of the miracle; by the triumph or failure of Savonarola she meant to decide her own destiny. If she could really see Fra Domenico walk unscathed through the flames she believed that all her miserable doubts and hesitations would be stilled, and that she would forget the Medici and all temptation, and become in reality as calm and humble, as resigned and pious as she was in appearance.

The excitement in Florence was extraordinary; no less than two thousand citizens, men, women, and even children, had testified to their devotion to, and their belief in, the prophet by offering to follow Fra Domenico through the flames; others, though far fewer, had volunteered to follow Fra Guiliano Pondinelli, the champion of the Franciscans.

The interest of the Piagnoni, the Arrabbiati, the Palleschi, and the Compagnacci in the event amounted to a frenzy; all men felt that on this trial depended the future fame and even security of Girolamo Savonarola.

His friends were enthusiastic, his enemies jubilant; those who were neither awaited the issue with mingled

curiosity and contempt; the majority were animated by the vulgar love of a spectacle, for they promised themselves, should the miracle fail, the excitement of seeing the two daring friars burnt to ashes.

One man at least looked forward to the trial with absolute confidence and triumphant joy: Fra Domenico himself.

The Convent of San Marco had drawn up eight theses and published them in scarlet ink; these placards might be read pasted up in various parts of Florence; the substance of them was that the Church should be henceforth purified and chastened, that the heathen should be converted, and that the Borgia's excommunication of Savonarola was invalid.

The truth of these statements was to be proved by the miracle which should demonstrate that Savonarola was verily the elect and beloved of God.

Aprilis asked her husband to take her to the trial; if he had refused she meant somehow to have escaped and gone; but he good-humouredly and indifferently assented; he was more interested in a conversation he had lately had with a Genoese merchant who had given him some details of a compatriot of his—one Messere Cristofano Columbo, discoverer of the wonderful New World, those islands beyond the Ganges, among which were probably the Fortunate Isles or even the Earthly Paradise.

Aprilis did not even listen to this talk of a new and dim world, her thoughts were too utterly occupied by the present-day Florence.

She urged Cristofano as to his opinion of the terrible ordeal to which the friar had to submit.

"I am sorry for Fra Girolamo," he answered, "but he has brought this upon himself, for he has so wrought upon the minds of the people that they have become fanatic, and nothing but a miracle will content them. Who but he turned the head of Fra Domenico? In that man he has raised an enthusiast whom he cannot control, and who now will be his ruin."

"Thou art still incredulous!" said Aprilis; her eyes were eager and her lips trembled; "but there may be a miracle!"

"There will be no miracle, child!" He smiled pleasantly, with an air of gentle tolerance.

"If there is not," replied Aprilis, "then I shall be free to do as I wish."

"Art thou not free now?"

"In no way free."

"What is it thou dost wish to do?"

"That," said Aprilis, "thou shalt know hereafter if the miracle fail."

He laughed softly, a little sadly.

"And thou," she added, "thou hast somewhat to lose or gain by this trial. Thou art a follower of the friar."

"Of no man," he answered. "If the friar fall it will make no difference to my place in the city. Yet I am grieved for one who has much greatness in him. Had he had tolerance he might have done much."

"Is it possible for goodness to tolerate evil?" exclaimed Aprilis.

"Goodness would not see so much evil," answered Christofano. "Think'st thou thy friar all goodness? Perfect goodness, perfect knowledge knows not hate and

bitterness and wrath and all that rage and fury that has tortured the soul of Girolamo Savonarola ; perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, is not blind to beauty and science, or a lover of ugliness and disease, deformity and suffering."

" He would say that thy words were the words of the tempter," said Aprilis.

" I told thee he lacked tolerance," smiled Cristofano.

They spoke no more on the matter, but that night Aprilis lay awake counting the hours to that appointed for the miracle.

Cristofano had reserved places on the Ringheria before the Palazzo Vecchio, close to Marzocco, from whence extended the pyre, consisting of two narrow piles of wood, meeting at the summit and well sprinkled with powder and dashed with tar ; between them was sufficient space for a man to pass, and the ground was paved with more wood, also tarred.

This pyre extended as far as the Tettoia dei Risani, and was to be lit at either end the moment the friars entered under the arch of wood, so that the flames would enclose them before and behind and nothing but a true miracle could prevent them being consumed.

In the Loggia dei Priori were grouped the Piagnoni and the Arrabbiati, a chain having been drawn between the two rival factions.

The piazza was guarded by mounted soldiers and barricaded at all approaches, for the crowd was tremendous, far exceeding those formerly gathered on this spot for the burning of the vanities.

Every loggia, window, roof was crowded ; boys and men perched in the gutters and clung to the lamp-posts

and rain-pipes; shouts, groans, screams and curses arose from this congested mass of people; here and there one fell, or was knocked down, or had the life crushed out of him and was dragged up roughly and thrust into the back streets, maimed or dead.

Men had one thought only, and the confused noises of the crowd broke now and then into one definite, deep, and dangerous murmur: "A miracle! a miracle!"

When Aprilis and Cristofano made their way to their places the Franciscans and Dominicans were already on the piazza. Aprilis looked at once at Fra Domenico, a brilliant figure, for he was clothed in a habit of clear crimson-coloured velvet, in sharp distinction from the black and white robes of the other Dominicans; he was standing at the end of the procession and quite near to Aprilis as she pressed to the edge of the Ringheria, so that she could observe his face; keenly she gazed at him, and her heart gave a leap of joy and hope and faith. Instinctively she sent a glance of triumph at her husband; for she felt sure of the miracle once she had looked at the ardent, confident, eager countenance of Fra Domenico, who could hardly contain his impatience and was trembling with the desire to step into the flames.

"Look at Fra Domenico!" she whispered to Cristofano.

"It seems he believes," he replied. "A fanatic—but look thou at Savonarola."

With a sudden apprehension clutching her heart Aprilis turned her eyes in the direction in which Cristofano was gazing.

She saw Fra Girolamo standing apart from his monks and holding the Eucharist, which glittered in a stray ray

of sunlight that parted the stormy clouds gathering behind the tall tower of the Palazzo Vecchio.

He wore a habit of spotless white which caused his face and his hands, plainly visible holding the Host, to appear of a ghastly darkness ; his sallow face was bloodless, the coarse lips closely pressed together, his eyes were fixed, almost blankly, on the mass of faces in the press. In his whole air was something terrible, superhuman, and despairing ; he seemed infinitely lonely and infinitely helpless, like a giant trapped and delivered to death by pigmies.

" Canst thou look at him and think of a miracle ? " asked Cristofano.

Aprilis was silent.

The sitting being held in the Palazzo now broke up ; the magistrates came out on to the Ringheria. Cristofano joined them. Aprilis's gaze followed him ; his figure was hardly distinguishable from the others, for all the members of the Council wore the long red robes, once the distinctive dress of the citizens of Florence ; the judges of the trial were there too. Aprilis saw them call Fra Domenico and speak to him. The Franciscan champion, Fra Guiliano Pondinelli, had disappeared ; it was said he was sick through fear.

Aprilis, watching Cristofano, saw him laugh ; most of his colleagues were laughing too ; a few seemed vexed and distressed, as if they thought the whole proceeding a scandal. They went in and out of the Palazzo, talking continually. Groans of impatience rose from the crowd, on all sides were heard the words : " A miracle ! a miracle ! Give us a miracle ! Lord Jesu, sweet Jesu, give us a miracle ! "

The feeling of hope and confidence that had uplifted the heart of Aprilis began to fade; the heat was oppressive, and her head began to ache; low rumbles of thunder were heard, the dark clouds fast overspreading the spring blue of the sky. With the disappearance of the sun a sense of depression came over her; she too began to share the impatience of the crowd at the delay; all was ready; why did they not light the fire and send the champions through the flames?

But still the magistrates argued and talked and laughed together and came and went on the Ringheria, and still Fra Girolamo stood motionless, clasping the Host that no longer glittered, for the last ray of sun had been absorbed by the storm-clouds.

Presently Cristofano returned, and Aprilis, sick at heart, asked him the reason for the delay.

He told her, with his easy tolerance, which was more scornful than mockery, that the Franciscans had accused Fra Domenico of wearing an enchanted habit; he had removed it; then they had objected to his under garments; and he had, within the Palazzo, stripped himself naked and put on the habit of a fellow monk.

Their next objection was to the cross he carried, which they declared might also be enchanted; this also he surrendered; they then demanded that he should remain apart from Savonarola so as to lessen the chance of fresh spells being worked, and to this also the eager champion consented.

"And now," added Cristofano, "they wish him to enter the flames without the Host, and to this he will not consent; and thereupon they accuse him of wishing to burn Christ, and he argues that Christ being God cannot

be burnt, and so we have a theological dispute which is likely to last all day and all night."

The proceedings seemed indeed to have come to a deadlock. Franciscans and Dominicans were now gathered together in earnest groups before the Palazzo, engaged in a bitter scholastic dispute as to whether Christ in the Sacrament could be burnt, even if the material of the Host was consumed, since He was eternal and incorruptible.

Savonarola, surrendering the Host to Fra Silvestro, fell on his knees in a corner of the Ringheria and prayed; the crowd, every minute becoming more indignant and wrathful, fixed their eyes on the white figure of the prophet and began to shout his name.

"Fra Girolamo! Fra Girolamo! the miracle! the miracle! Why dost thou not give us the miracle thou hast promised! To the flames! to the flames! A miracle! a miracle!"

And Aprilis stretched her arms over the railing of the Ringheria and whispered: "A miracle! a miracle!"

Still the monks argued. Fra Domenico, though sick with impatience to be put to the test, would not give up the Host; he had made every concession and was prepared to allow Fra Guiliano to also carry the Eucharist, but the Franciscans would not permit this, arguing that it was blasphemy, and so the weary, endless dispute continued, while every minute the rage of the crowd and the storm in the heavens increased.

Aprilis kept her glance fixed on Fra Girolamo, who knelt so motionless as to appear lifeless.

"Why does *he* not perform the miracle?" she asked

herself, with a shudder. "Why does he not light the pyre himself and walk through?"

And some of the crowd began to shout: "Why does not Savonarola himself enter the flames!"

The soldiers guarding the square were pushed aside, and the furious people began to swarm into the enclosed space of the piazza, and, headed by some of the Arrabbiati, pushed close to Savonarola with threatening words and gestures.

Among the leaders of this crowd Aprilis recognized Astorre della Gherardesca; his hard lean face was now as eager with hate as when he had helped to drive the Medici from this very door; for he believed that the curse of Savonarola had robbed him of Olimpia and had set the Signoria against him.

It was he who was raising the most furious cries of "Down with the false prophet! Down with the excommunicate! Down with the lying monk! Down with the blasphemer!"

And these insults were echoed from the piazza, from the roofs, from the windows, from the gutters and lamps where the children clung.

And these children were, many of them, those who, clothed in white and bearing branches of palm, had gone about Florence collecting vanities for the burning, and who, singing hymns of praise, had flung spring flowers before the feet of Savonarola.

"And God does not send an angel to help His prophet, and there is no miracle," thought Aprilis bitterly; and she looked coldly at Savonarola, whom she expected to see dragged down and slain by the furious deluded people.

He had now sprung to his feet, and throwing out his

arms with the majestic gesture with which he had swayed the people in the Duomo, endeavoured to silence the crowd.

But he was unable to make his voice heard, so deep and persistent were the shouts, curses, and imprecations. The Signoria sent some guards to his assistance, and an open fight was about to take place on the piazza when the black cloud that had been gathering suddenly broke into a tempest of rain, against which hardly the strongest could hold his feet.

Shouts and cries ceased; the Council, the judges, and the monks retired into the Palazzo; the crowd fought for such shelter as they could find; the elaborate pyre was beaten down, the sodden bundles of sticks fell one on to the other, and in a few minutes the tarred path where the monks were to have walked was a gushing channel of water.

The trial was for to-day an impossibility; when the brief fury of the storm had subsided the monks prepared to leave the piazza.

Savonarola was protected by an escort of soldiers; mud was thrown at him, curses and mockeries hurled after him. The soldiers could not prevent him from being knocked and buffeted; once or twice he nearly fell on the rough cobbles, and the filthy rain-water, gathered in pools in the piazza, was splashed from hem to neck of his white habit.

He said nothing, and his eyes were downcast, but his face was not meek.

Aprilis, looking at his humiliation, felt her last spark of faith wither; she stretched her arms and sighed as if freed of a great burden.

"No miracle, no prophet, no God," she said, "and I am free."

Cristofano looked at her and she smiled quietly back.

"Thou wast right," she said. "It was all a delusion. Now take me home, for this great rain has made it cold."

And she gave a last look to the bent and soiled figure of Savonarola, as, pursued by the scorn and fury of the people, he staggered back to San Marco.

CHAPTER VII

FRA GIROLAMO TO THE WORLD

As there had been no miracle on the public piazza so there was no miracle in the heart of Aprilis; the old loves and longings had not been vanquished by the joy of holy calm, the old restlessness and discontent had not been superseded by the ecstasy of complete faith. She wondered now at her own former simplicity; why had she believed and been afraid of Fra Girolamo?—a poor creature who had failed, even as Piero dei Medici had failed, whom she had seen driven with ignominy before the crowd, struck and insulted, and who had no more been able to call the angels to his assistance than the Magnifico had been when these same Florentines had hurled him with curses from the Porta San Gallo.

The once-acclaimed prophet who had swayed the whole city was, in the eyes of all Florence, now nothing but a fallen and broken idol, and in no disillusioned heart so discredited as in the stormy heart of Aprilis.

Upon the day the Medicean conspirators, Bernardo del Nero and his companions, were executed, Cristofano told Aprilis that one of them had betrayed the hiding-place of Piero dei Medici, who was still near Florence, being too disheartened and too penniless and friendless

to venture to return to Rome, where indeed his welcome was no longer likely to be warm.

Nor was his former scheme of joining the French forces in Italy any longer practicable, for on the day of the trial by fire Charles of France had died at Amboise, abandoned by all save his meanest attendants, who had flung him on to a dung-heap to breathe his last.

It was fitting that the hero should thus die on the day the prophet was shamed. So Savonarola and his champion ceased as a power, and the shameful Borgia rule they had dreamt to break held on serenely at Rome, the Church remained unpurged, sin unrebuked, and Girolamo Savonarola unjustified by his God.

To Aprilis it seemed also fitting that Piero dei Medici should be lurking near the scene of his old splendours—hesitating, downcast, irresolute, abandoned, despised.

The fall of his great enemy could mean no triumph for him; Florence might forsake Savonarola, but it could never tolerate the Magnifico.

The Cardinal Giovanni was abroad, waiting his time and gathering learning—heathen learning—in foreign cities. Men said that in his person might revive the glories of his house; he himself was certain of it, as was his younger brother Guiliano. In Rome Alfonsina D'Orsini was teaching the little Lorenzo to forget his father; thus even his own race joined in the general contempt of Piero.

"Unfortunate," said Aprilis, "unfortunate," and she counted over and treasured the words of Fiora: "'He remembers you—he thinks of you,'" and she pictured the wolf-mask in the green mantle, the face that had been disclosed to her by the street light in the alley

beyond the Giardini Medici—her first visit to Cafaggiuolo rendered hateful by her disillusionment and the presence of the Venetian wanton, her second when she watched Piero sleep.

"And I forsook him because of a picture of the Virgin and the memory of Girolamo Savonarola." She recalled the fierce ride back to Florence, the streets red with torchlight before the wrecked palace of the Medici, the beautiful white statue crushed to powder under the direction of the Dominican, her own late return, and Cristofano coming to her with his arm wounded, and how she had submitted to him and ministered to him—then and ever since.

"It was all a mistake, all a madness," she said. "But now I will redeem."

She began again to bleach and gild her hair, to fetch out old recipes for beautifying hands and face—all the weapons of feminine resource; locked into her room she took out her richest bridal dresses and smoothed out the silks, laces, embroideries, and furs . . . she was glad now that she had not spoilt her fine skin with the scourge and the hair shirt.

The mirror to which she had lately been so indifferent she now examined fiercely; she was still completely lovely, the lovelier now she had lost the repression and reserve of the Piagnoni; she wondered why Cristofano did not notice how she bloomed; always in the depth of her heart was a slight awe and dread of her husband's silence and calm.

He would not tell her the hiding-place of Piero, though she forced herself to ask; he did not bluntly refuse, but laughed the question away. Whether the Signoria

would make him prisoner or no was doubtful: Piero skulking in disgraceful hiding was as harmless to the Republic as Piero bareheaded in the courtyard of the Bargello or the Stinche, he said. But Aprilis did not trust his words; she believed it impossible that Piero would be allowed to escape; and there was a price on him, living or dead, if he came within the territory of Florence.

She wished to save him and to share his flight; but for the moment stood in helpless darkness as to his place of refuge.

But Aprilis was not left long in this trembling suspense. One brilliant afternoon, when Cristofano was in Florence, a country girl came to the Villa degli Albizzi with a basket of scarlet cherries and crimson roses. She insisted on delivering the basket to Aprilis herself; beneath the fruit and flowers was a letter from Fiora dei Visdomini.

"I was present at the trial by fire comedy. Do you still believe in your prophet? We have failed again, and noble blood has paid the forfeit, but it will not be for ever.

"Will you deign so much pity to a man I think you loved as to warn me if he has been betrayed?

"You must know as much from your husband. There is one remembers you, trusts you—more!—and bids me write this.

"You may send to me or find me at Cafaggiuolo. You see you are trusted."

Aprilis went up to Cristofano's elegant studio, and with a quivering hand wrote the reply:

"You may trust me, for I am now wholly yours.

"I did not before know my lord's hiding-place, bu I believe it is known in Florence.

"To-night I come, putting myself in your hands.

"The poison lilies are uprooted and flung away, so think is the Florence of Savonarola."

She dispatched this letter by the peasant girl, ther sat down before the black dining-table, on which were heaped the glossy shining cherries and the soft dul roses.

"At last!" she kept saying to herself, "at last!" and a great faintness came over her so that she had to hold tightly to the wicker chair to prevent herself from falling, and the shaded room spun before her eyes.

"At last! at last!"

The world seemed very beautiful; she noticed with astonishment the loveliness of the lime tree seen through the small window, the joy of the purple sky and the sunshine—the whole gorgeous fairness of the Tuscan summer.

She rose with joy in her own comeliness too, and stretched her arms and laughed.

The unloosing of a great love quickened her senses to an exquisite perception.

A great love—yet even to herself she wondered if it was love, so vague and yet terrible had become the passion that possessed her, so unreal was now the figure of that lover she had seen but three times face to face—a figure of fantasy masked like an animal, a figure of an insolent tyrant mocking her with a girl of the streets, a figure of a disgraced and broken man turning eagerly to her offered devotion, a ruler flying before his people, driven forth from his native city with curses—all

these images combined in one—splendid, unfortunate, worthless.

That night she could not fulfil the promise made in the letter to Fiora dei Visdomini and fly to Cafaggiuolo; Cristofano returned from Florence, and she had no chance to even leave the house.

"The friar loses ground every hour," said Cristofano; "the people who went mad for him are now ready to rend him. Since the day of the ordeal by fire there are none left in Florence who believe in him save a few fanatic monks and women."

He smiled, leaning forward across the table; he was eating cherries from the basket sent that morning by Fiora dei Visdomini. Aprilis, looking at the fruit, smiled too.

"Fra Girolamo has been unfortunate," she said.

"He played with fire and has been burnt," returned Cristofano. "How could he dare to declare God on his side and promise miracles?"

"We all think God on our side," murmured Aprilis; pale with anxiety, impatience, and repression she rose, unable longer to contain her restlessness, and went to the window, driven by the soul's instinctive longing for the wide spaces of the air, for loneliness and freedom.

She gazed at the undulating valleys, obscured by the blue moon mists and the darkness of the cypress groves on the distant hills, showing black against the pearly lightness of the night sky; the moon was already halfway up the heavens and unobscured by clouds.

"Thou art still lonely here?" said Cristofano; he pushed the basket of cherries aside, set his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his broad white palm; be-

neath his wide, half-drooped lids his gaze was keenly, watchfully on his wife.

Her profile, clearly shown in the lamplight, was towards him ; the slightly hollowed contours, the sensitive delicacy of the lines, the clear honey-like paleness of her complexion, so slightly flushed with rose colour, were very lovely ; her straight, white, slender throat and the fine spirals of her fair hair were obscured by a veil of a misty colour fastened across her brow by a silver cord ; her dress was white, full and clinging in a multitude of little folds and thickly embroidered with sprigs of carnations, red and pink ; her figure showed almost pitifully frail and slender despite the puffings and gatherings of her elaborate sleeves and the lacings of her bodice.

The memory of her as she stood so, with wistful eyes averted from him, remained long in Cristofano's mind.

" Thou art lonely here ? " he repeated.

Again she did not answer.

After a little he left her. Aprilis shivered with hope ; but it was impossible for her to leave the villa that night, as Cristofano remained till late on the terrace across which she must pass to reach the gate.

The next day he took her to Florence, insisting gently that she should come ; the worst of the plague was over, and he wished to buy her a new jennet, and must have her judgment on the matter. Aprilis came, finding no reasonable excuse to refuse ; though her body was going towards Florence, her spirit was hastening on the road to Cafaggiuolo. She found the city changed ; gaily dressed men and women had again appeared in the streets ; the crowds of children whom Savonarola had

turned into his holy bands of white-robed guardians of the morality of Florence were again in the gutter fighting, throwing stones, and insulting the passers-by; wanton women dared again to appear on the balconies and in litters with the curtains undrawn; the city was returning to the aspect it had worn under Lorenzo and Piero.

As Aprilis crossed the Piazza San Marco she saw Savonarola returning to the convent; he was followed by Andrea de Salvucci.

Aprilis looked at him closely over the posy of red roses she held to her nostrils to deaden the fetid odour of the streets.

He was walking unsteadily, with an almost staggering gait, his cowl was pulled far over his face, and his hands folded under his robe. Cristofano reined up his horse and saluted the friar.

Savonarola stopped at the sound of his name and looked up at the two riders. Aprilis continued to gaze at him over her close-pressed flowers.

Fra Girolamo's eyes were swollen and bloodshot, a feverish patch of red flamed on his cheekbones, his coarse lips were strained and purplish.

"What is your errand abroad, father?" asked Cristofano courteously; but though he addressed the friar he glanced past him at Andrea de Salvucci, who stood aside sullenly, looking at the ground.

"I have been among the sick and the outcast of this unhappy city," replied Savonarola; then he added fiercely, "Do *you* believe God has forsaken me?"

"Nay," said the Albizzi smoothly. "I believe that He supports you as much as hitherto, father."

"You too mock," said Fra Girolamo. "And you"—he turned his restless, unhappy eyes on Aprilis and her rich appointments—"have you found the panacea for your sins?"

"Perhaps, father," answered Aprilis wildly. "I have had to search for all panaceas myself, since no man can give them to me."

Savonarola turned away towards the convent, as Andrea followed.

"Dost thou not know me?" asked Cristofano of him quickly.

The monk did not reply nor raise his eyes, but followed his superior into San Marco.

Savonarola went up at once to his cell; when he reached the long corridor leading to it he paused and turned sharply on the silent monk behind him.

"Wherefore dost thou come with me?" he asked sternly. "I would be alone."

Andrea flung up his head.

"And I would speak with you—demand some things of you."

Fra Girolamo shuddered, it seemed with wrath or apprehension, and half put out his hand in a warning gesture of silence, but the young man continued heedlessly:

"I left all for you; what have you to offer me? What have you given me in return for the world?" he demanded eagerly. "Come, answer me, father, for I am desperate. . . . I left much . . . learning . . . beauty . . . that woman we saw just now . . . beauty . . . even she no longer believes." He laughed unsteadily. "You are neither prophet nor saint, and you

will never rule Christendom. God will not speak for you—is not this true ? "

Savonarola did not answer ; an expression of wrath and anguish transformed his features into a look well-nigh demoniacal.

" Can you not even answer me ? " cried Andrea wildly ; " for I am in despair."

" I have deceived no one," said the Prior.

" But you—have you been deceived ?—the visions and the voices ? "

" If I have been deceived, Heaven itself has deceived me," replied Savonarola ; and freeing himself from the young monk, who clung to him in inarticulate agony, he hastened towards his cell, adding, " In a little while come to me, I have letters—important letters—in a little while."

When he gained his own privacy he at once brought out writing materials and began to write with passionate activity.

He wrote to the world—the sentence, " Fra Girolamo to the world," kept beating in his brain between the other sentences he was composing.

He wrote to kings, princes, potentates, justifying himself against his enemies, Sforza and the Borgia, appealing against his excommunication, proclaiming his own innocence and his own right, beseeching all to grant him justice.

It was a bold and haughty move, perhaps a desperate move, and, for good or ill, must be his last.

When he had finished the final letter it was already nearly dark ; he rose, his head throbbing, his eyes burning, and lit the taper on his desk.

He then remembered that Andrea had not come ; and the letters were ready. He had his special secret messenger, and he wished to send the monk to bring him to the convent. He had arranged to-morrow as the day of departure, but now he was feverish with impatience for the thing to be done at once.

With the taper in his hand he went out into the corridor.

The distant noises of the city beat round the inner silence of the convent ; the open cross-beamed roof was in complete darkness, so that the two lines of roofless cells seemed to stand under a black heaven ; the doors were all closed, and there was no one about.

Savonarola moved slowly, for he felt a great weakness, to the third door, which was Andrea's, and opened it with a shaking hand. The tiny, white-washed cell contained nothing but a trestle bed and a stool ; on the wall facing the door was a pale, ethereal fresco by Fra Angelico. Savonarola flashed the candle round the confined space.

Above the bed should have hung the black crucifix, heavy, menacing, that was repeated over every monk's pillow ; instead, the crucifix lay face downwards on the coarse blanket, and, from the huge nail from which it had been taken, hung the body of Andrea de Salvucci ; he had used his rope girdle to encircle his throat, and his habit swung straight and shapeless.

Savonarola peered up into the distorted and despairing face of his disciple ; the taper slipped through his fingers, and was extinguished on the floor, like the tapers of excommunication.

. . . . . .

The letters were not sent that day, but left Florence on the morrow; the messenger on whom Savonarola relied was in the pay of the Duke of Milan, and Fra Girolamo's appeal to the world was delivered into the hands of his enemies.

CHAPTER VIII

DEAD SEA FRUIT

It was several days before Aprilis found the chance for her flight to Cafaggiuolo, days of bitter impatience and burning excitement for her, days of anxious waiting and feigned composure difficult to endure.

At last Cristofano left her alone in the villa: his presence was needed in Florence day and night. The new Signoria was inimical to Savonarola; the whole city was becoming united against the friar, for the Pope had threatened to lay them under an interdict unless they ceased to support the excommunicated monk, and even the boldest Piagnoni trembled before the terrors of an interdict. Matters were fast reaching a crisis, and it was not the policy of Cristofano to be absent from the councils of Florence at an important moment.

Aprilis no longer took any interest in these things. She tried to forget Savonarola; she pictured herself with Piero dei Medici, both of them broken, beaten, disgraced, yet strangely at peace after all the striving, all the fury, all the pretence.

The very day Cristofano left the villa Fiora's peasant messenger came again, this time with the excuse of a pannier of eggs and apples.

She brought another letter from Madonna dei Visdomini, reproaching Aprilis for her unfulfilled promise, and speaking of the sad condition and the disappointment of the Magnifico.

Aprilis wrote no answer, but she arranged with the girl that she should come and fetch her as soon as dusk fell. She spent that day in a strange state of excitement, she moved and spoke like one under a spell, her head burned with fever, her limbs were cold and stiff.

While the sun was still high, she locked herself in her chamber, and arrayed herself in the most gorgeous of the dresses prepared for her wedding with Astorre della Gherardesca, a straight vesture of rose cloth of gold, open at the sides on an under-garment of violet-coloured silk embroidered heavily at the hem with seed pearls; the breast and sleeves were also thickly sewn with pearls, and the long white gauze veil was edged with them. Her one ornament was a green-enamel dragon with ruby eyes, which hung by a fine chain from her neck.

The perfection of her own beauty, now she was exquisitely clothed, perfumed and adorned, made her heart leap with deep pleasure; she could picture the look in Piero's eyes when she came into his presence.

As soon as the sun had set behind the cypress groves the other side of the valley, and the purple of evening was obscuring the blue of the day, Aprilis concealed her gorgeous dress under a voluminous riding-mantle and crept down to the gate.

The peasant girl was waiting in the narrow road under the olive trees; two jennets stood beside her; with a whispered greeting Aprilis mounted one, the girl

sprang on the other, and they rode off down the long, winding road that led through fruit orchards and kitchen gardens to the Porta San Niccolò, and so across Florence and the Arno to the Porta San Gallo.

The city was beautiful in the half-dark, the long reflections of the lights along the riverside shaking in the deep green water running smoothly to its fall beyond the gates, the lamps in windows and at street corners, high up in balconies, low down in doorways, showing luminous and lovely.

There were many people abroad, and much laughter, singing, and music of guitars and lutes coming from the eating-houses and inns, from terraces and gardens.

Playing and dicing were taking place at the corners under the lamps, here and there came the sound of brawling. Groups of workmen and students stood before the red-lettered proclamation of Savonarola; most of them were laughing. The tinkle of a little bell broke across the worldly noises, a priest under a yellow satin baldaquin carried the Host to the dying; he was picking his way fretfully through the dirty street, and was followed by an eager rabble.

Aprilis was glad when they had left the city, and were up and out on the open hillside with the free, silent airs blowing upon them and the scent of the wild flowers perfuming the night.

The little jennets went slowly up the long inclines towards Pratolino. The moon rose and waned, and they were yet far from Cafaggiuolo; they stopped at a cottage where the girl was known and rested a while. Aprilis did not sleep nor touch the goat's milk and wheaten bread offered her. When they started on their way

again the sun was already rising from behind the great rim of hills. Aprilis felt neither drowsiness nor fatigue; to her the night had passed like a fantastic dream, and the future seemed as fantastic, as dreamlike.

The sun was already high before they reached the woodlands of Cafaggiuolo, the chill of the dawn had given place to the ardent glow of early day, white wisps of mist rose from the dewy low-lying fields and disappeared among the woods and groves. A few ox-carts began to traverse the road, but for the most part the country was as empty as when Aprilis had first seen it; and when they reached the white castellated villa they were alone in the landscape.

The iron gates were closed, the shutters fastened; luxuriant wild iris, daisy, and dandelion had overgrown the once smooth path to the house; the curling strands of convolvulus wreathed the guardian cypress and the rusty bars of the gate.

Aprilis glanced up at the window of the room where she had been a prisoner, the room where Piero had slept with his hand in hers, the room where, likely enough, the Virgin of the Seven Dolours still hung above the door into the Cardinal's library.

"The villa is closed," she said. "Where is Madonna Fiora?"

"It was here I was told to bring you," replied the girl. "Wait but a moment, Madonna."

She dismounted and quickly disappeared round the garden wall of the villa.

Aprilis too slipped from the jennet and stretched her stiff limbs, letting the mantle fall apart from her rich vesture; the day, the place, the hour were extraordi-

narily beautiful and tranquil ; the freshness of the early air, the brightness of the early sun were sweet indeed. Aprilis unveiled her face and let the pure breeze blow back her long gilded curls.

She trembled slightly, expecting to see Piero dei Medici part the bushes and come to her ; he must be waiting for her—and near.

Her hand passed slowly over the rough coat of the tired little jennet that stood with drooping head ; with the other she pulled at the lush grass that grew round the portals of the gate.

Aprilis waited, shivering with some strange dread or joy, some emotion beyond words.

A rough peasant came from the direction of the road she had just traversed and saluted her respectfully.

" You come for me ? " she asked.

" For Madonna Aprilis degli Albizzi," and despite his humility she saw that he looked at her with keen curiosity.

" I am she."

" Will the lady follow me ? "

" The jennets ? "

" Afterwards I will attend to them, Madonna."

She followed him, feeling uneasy in his company, longing for Piero, for Fiora, even for the girl who had conducted her hither.

Silently they proceeded through the long grass, brambles, and wild flowers until the villa was out of sight behind them.

Half concealed in a little hollow a small cottage appeared, built of stone, square, the front covered by a climbing lemon tree, heavy with hard green fruit. A

little vineyard was behind, and in front a stone courtyard filled with earthenware pots and pans and broken vases in which grew basil and other sweet herbs; from the small upper window floated coloured rags, garments of man and woman, wet and dirty.

A few lean hens strutted about the courtyard, and a thin watchdog snapped at the newcomers.

"The Magnifico is within," said the peasant, pointing to the narrow black doorway. "Will Madonna enter?"

Aprilis hung back.

"Where is Madonna Fiora?" she asked.

"Presently she will come—she may be within—will Madonna enter?" repeated the man, humbly but persistently, and without waiting for her answer he turned away, leaving her alone in the little open courtyard.

For a moment she stood at a loss, then she advanced, holding up her rich hem from the stone pavement.

"Fiora," she said softly between her heavy breaths. "Fiora——"

There was no answer.

She crept to the open door, and her voice stumbled on another name, "Piero."

Standing in the doorway, the sunlight behind her illuminating her fairness, the gold hair beneath the veils, the flash of the beautiful dress, she appeared indeed something rare and wonderful in this poor place. Again she called with renewed courage, "Piero."

Then, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she discerned a man and woman in the far corner of the room, and she was silent.

The man was stretched on a dirty mattress and half

covered with a torn mantle; his head, covered with tumbled dark red curls, rested on the woman's lap. She was a peasant, robust and comely, her ragged chemise and petticoats bright coloured and gaudy, her heavy black hair half concealed under a flowered handkerchief; he was Piero di Lorenzo dei Medici, the Magnifico, the one-time ruler of Florence, unshaved, tattered, awakening stupidly from sleep.

The girl turned and stared with awe and wonder at Aprilis; Piero dragged himself on to his elbow and gazed blankly.

Aprilis could not move; she stood with one hand on either lintel looking at him.

With an effort he stammered her name:

"Aprilis—Aprilis!"

She shivered; without moving she began to laugh, laughter under her breath as pitiful as sobs.

"Oh, Aprilis!" said Piero.

"It is the Madonna," whispered the peasant; he pushed her away from him and rose, staggering clumsily.

"Why art thou here?" he asked. "Am I betrayed?" and his hand went round to his side as if in search of a weapon.

"You are not betrayed," answered Aprilis.

"Thou—thou didst remember me?" he muttered.

"Where is Madonna Fiora?"

"Fiora? Fiora? I have not seen her this many a day. Who brought thee here?"

"You were not aware of my coming?"

He answered with some of his old fierceness:

"Should I have been here? Now thou wilt hate me. But I was always unfortunate."

"We are both unfortunate, Piero," said Aprilis, and she left the hut.

She heard his voice calling after her as she had heard it when she had fled from him before, "Aprilis—Aprilis!"

She walked back to the villa; where she had left the little jennets, stood the peasant girl with a saddled horse.

"Whose jest is this?" asked Aprilis.

The girl fell away before her, frightened and silent.

"A jest—a jest!" repeated Aprilis. She leant against the horse, so white and still the girl was thrown into a terror, and began to cry and wring her hands.

"Signore! oh, Signore!"

"Take me away," said Aprilis, "take me away——"

She thought Piero was following her—the thought of seeing him again spurred her like a dagger-prick in her side.

She caught hold of the horse, intending to mount, when she saw it was saddled for a man; and in the same instant she lifted her eyes, to see Cristofano standing where the peasant had been.

"In my heart I was always sure of it!" she exclaimed. "Thou didst know everything?"

"Everything, Aprilis."

She turned to flee, stumbling over her long gown, her face and gesture full of horror.

But he caught her hands and held them tightly. "Thou art free to stay with him if thou wilt, Aprilis."

She turned on him desperate and accusing eyes.

"The letters from Fiora dei Visdomini—thou didst write them? These people who brought me here—they are thine?"

" I wished thee to see the man thou didst yearn for. I tell thee thou art free to go with him if thou wilt."

" Is he betrayed ? Wilt thou betray him ? "

" Nay, Florence has no further need of him."

" Nor of me," Aprilis began to weep. " My life has been Dead Sea fruit—God and the Devil have both failed me."

" Poor Aprilis ! " said Cristofano, " poor child ! "

She looked at him with wonder through the slow and bitter tears.

" Thou—thou canst still pity me ? "

" Come back to Florence," he answered.

She did not resist ; he helped her on to the pillion and mounted himself ; she miserably drew the mantle together over the gorgeous dress that was so ironical now, and so a second time rode back to Florence from Cafaggiuolo.

. . . . . .

When they reached the Piazza San Marco, their way was blocked by a vast armed crowd furiously shouting and jostling each other ; round the door of the convent a fierce fight was in progress.

Several in the press knew Cristofano, and way was made for him ; as they came nearer the convent, Aprilis saw fire and smoke issue from the windows, and the black and white figures of the monks struggling in the crowd.

Girolamo Savonarola was being dragged from the door ; he came silently and without resistance, his head was held high, and his expression was one of awful hate and wrath and despair.

For one second Aprilis saw his terrible haggard

countenance; then he was pulled down and dragged away amid the triumphant shouts of his enemies, who thrust each other under foot in their frantic attempts to get near enough to insult and buffet the fallen prophet.

She had seen the same sight when Piero was cast from Florence—there was now little to choose between the fate of the two men: he who had listened to the world and he who had listened to God were both equally kicked into the mire.

Aprilis veiled her face; she felt mocked of God and man.

CHAPTER IX

"IF I AM DECEIVED"

APRILIS fell ill—the mind acting on the body sent her into a sickness of exhaustion, of despair, a fever in which she was conscious of nothing but two figures which haunted her bedside with ghastly persistency—the dishevelled figure of Piero dei Medici sleeping on the knee of the peasant girl and the dishevelled figure of Girolamo Savonarola between the mace-bearers of the Signoria, with the angry crowd brandishing their weapons in his face.

The two men between whom her soul had been divided, distracted and torn, were equally cast down and done for.

Sometimes a third figure would join these other two, the figure of Cristofano, calm, tranquil, kind, holding her hand and looking at her with eyes of understanding and compassion.

The day came when her senses cleared and she awoke to find this last figure real. She was in her bed in the Villa degli Albizzi, and the blue curtains were drawn back so that she could see the whole chamber full of the summer sun.

Beside her sat Cristofano; he was looking at her and holding her wrist lightly with his long cool fingers.

He wore his long white cloth riding-coat, and on his knee was a scarlet cap with a heron's feather.

The smooth curls fell evenly either side his face that was grave, a little sad, yet smiling.

Aprilis tried to raise herself, but fell back through weakness; her pale hair lay in a long twist on the pillow, her face was hollow and had very little of her former beauty; her expression was wistful, like that of a child who has been punished and knows not why.

"Why did they not let me die?" she whispered. "I very much wanted to die."

"Dost thou so hate me?" asked Cristofano.

She was silent a moment, gathering her vague thoughts.

"Thou didst play with me," she said at last, "fooled me and made a mock of me." And the tears rose to her eyes.

"None of these things," he answered calmly. "I left thee free between thy two desires. Was it my fault that both failed thee?"

She stared at him, then her lids drooped.

"Fra Girolamo?" she murmured.

"The friar is a prisoner of the Signoria; belike he will soon be set at liberty."

"And thou?"

"I?"

"Thy affairs—thy ambitions?"

"I am Gonfaloniere in the new Signoria," he replied gently.

"So thy wishes are—gratified—thou alone hast found success."

"Because I choose the mean—the middle way. Aprilis, Aprilis, neither Medici nor monk are right, but both, and yet neither; canst thou not see that?"

Aprilis did not answer, her head drooped to one side and she lay as if asleep.

Cristofano watched her a little while, then left her, and mounting his black horse rode to Florence and to the Bargello, where Savonarola, Fra Domenico, and Fra Silvestro were prisoners. When he had told Aprilis that it was likely the friar would soon be set at liberty he had deceived her, for Savonarola was without a friend, without hope, condemned to death; and this despite the fact that the three trials he had undergone had failed to establish any of the charges brought against him.

But he was in the hands of his enemies; his friends had fallen from power, and since the day of the trial by fire all his following had fallen away from him; there was no one to speak for him, scarcely to pity him, in the Florence he had once ruled.

Cristofano was almost the only member of the Signoria who remembered with respect the days of Savonarola's greatness and had compassion for him in his downfall, and even he was rising on the friar's ruin as the friar had risen on the ruin of the Medici.

Neither curiosity nor malice led him to visit Savonarola in his cell; his motive was a nobler one, a desire to pay a tribute of respect to a man whom in much he admired, a desire to justify himself before a man who might think him a traitor, at least disloyal.

He had seen Savonarola at his last trial, but not

since, and the monk had recently been again under the torture; in all he had been tortured, cruelly and persistently, for the space of two weeks.

The confessions wrung from him in this manner, which included denials of his visions and supernatural power, had been made known in Florence, and served to bitterly overthrow the last faith of those who had till then believed in him; these confessions had also been shown to Fra Domenico, who under torment had confessed nothing, and to Fra Silvestro, who had at once admitted everything required of him by the Signoria.

Maruffi cared nothing for what Savonarola might say, and Fra Domenico's joyous and superb faith was proof against this as it had been proof against torture.

"The confessions are forged," he had said. "Fra Girolamo never denied himself."

In the main the noble friar's instinct was right, the confessions of Savonarola had been falsified and greatly altered. Cristofano well knew this, knew that though in the delirium of torture Fra Girolamo had raved strangely, yet on the last time when he was being stripped for the rack he had turned to the Bishop of Herda, the Papal Commissioner, and to such of the Signoria as were present, and had said:

"Now hearken to my words and bear me witness, ye Signoria of Florence! *I have denied my divine light through fear of torment.* If I must suffer I will suffer for the truth. All that I declared came from God, truly from Him came." Yet later, raving in agony, he had again denied himself, and Cristofano wondered with a calm pity if the monk could really believe in the

God who abandoned him, if he was really sincere in maintaining the power of the faith that could not lift his spirit above the faintness of bodily agony.

Of such as Fra Domenico there could be no doubt that they believed and that the radiance of their belief supported them ; the disciple had laughed in the face of his tormentors, and no word nor moan had escaped him ; it indeed seemed as if, in his case, the strength of the soul had rendered invulnerable the body, and that the heroic friar could despise the rack, the cord, and the pulley.

But what of Savonarola, who went into delirium at the first wrench of agony ?

" Was he only a charlatan ? " thought Cristofano as he entered the wretched cell allotted to the Prior of San Marco.

The air was close and stale ; the noises of the city did not penetrate the thick walls, but shrieks, moans, and broken laughter were plainly to be heard, though muffled by the thickness of the walls.

Cristofano knew that they came from Fra Silvestro, who was in the neighbouring dungeon ; the wretched epileptic who had been Savonarola's prop and guiding star was completely maddened by the torture he had undergone ; as Cristofano stepped over the threshold of the cell he distinctly heard the raucous voice of the crazy monk blaspheming and cursing the name of Savonarola.

Gently the Albizzi closed the door and said, almost under his breath, " Fra Girolamo."

The gaunt figure that had been lying on the straw in the far corner rose to his knees, with a shudder and a

start of alarm, and stared at the newcomer with the look of a desperate and helpless animal.

"I am not here to torture thee nor to surprise thee into a confession," said Cristofano.

The monk's first expression of terror passed; he sank back on his side and rested his head on his hand; the effort of moving had brought the blood to his nostrils and his lips; he wiped it away with the sleeve of his white habit, which was already marked with other bloodstains and the dirt of the torture-room. He wore neither hood, mantle, nor sandals, but his heavy black rosary had been left him; as he had now no girdle it lay on the straw at his side.

These weeks in prison had reduced him to utter emaciation: his body, already worn out by penance and mortification, had been broken entirely by the torture; his countenance, always strange and terrible, was now inhuman in its expression of mental and physical suffering, so livid and ghastly in hue, so distorted in line was his awful face.

His left arm was almost shattered, and hung across his breast; his bare feet were twisted as if still in the agony of the rack, the marks of the cords showed in great weals round ankles and wrists.

Cristofano leant against the wall and looked at him sorrowfully.

"I would I saw thee in San Marco again, Fra Girolamo."

Savonarola spoke, and his voice was as changed and terrible as his face.

"I deserve all. I have denied God, denied God for fear of torments, for fear of torments! God *did* inspire

in what I said! My visions came from Him! I was His prophet, and for fear of torments I denied it! Behold how He hath punished me!"

And he gazed at his helpless arm.

"Thou dost still believe?" asked Cristofano softly.

"Shall the soul despair because the body is weak?" cried Savonarola wildly. "Because now the sky is dark, shall I not believe that there was once light?"

He paused, moistened his lips, and looking at his visitor as if he had only just recognized him, added:

"What will you say for me before the Pratica, Cristofano degli Albizzi, you who once said you were follower of mine?"

"I shall say, father, all that I can say for one whose like is not found twice in a hundred years. Yet thou knowest that my words will be weak before the rage of the present Signoria, that is entirely under the fear of Rome. I would that it were not so."

Savonarola seemed surprised by this speech and by the familiar form of address, at once more affectionate and more respectful, that Cristofano adopted.

"You surely have no tenderness for me?" he asked grimly. "Nay, I well know you never had. There are only two who loved me—Fra Domenico and Pico della Mirandola—he is in Paradise, as I have seen," he added. "But you do not pity me. I am above pity."

"I pity rather those who have put thee here, father," replied Cristofano. "But thou didst undertake too much in thinking to withstand the world."

Savonarola glanced at him keenly.

"Curiosity brought you here," he said. "You would know if this poor creature you see here still retains

his faith. I tell you he does! He does! The wretched body fails, fails, but in my spirit I am not conquered. What I declared was of God, truly came from God. My visions and my prophecies *were* of Heaven."

"But the overthrow of Rome?" said Cristofano softly. "The greatness thou shouldst have attained, the conversion of the heathen, if these things were promised from Heaven, how is it they have not come to pass?"

"God will do all in His just time," replied Savonarola; "and for myself, have I not prophesied my martyrdom? When they offered me the red robe," he added wildly, "did I not say a robe red indeed, a robe of blood, would be my fate? As for the Borgia, he will die miserably, and go into the pit of abomination, and Rome will fall as she fell before the barbarians—and this will be when one of the accursed Medici is Pope, and he will be called Clement."

He raised himself, and with a sudden effort got to his feet; his tall figure in the bloodstained white garment, leaning against the dirty wall, had the same terrible grandeur as when he leant from the pulpit of the Duomo, swaying thousands with his words.

As he looked at him a curious sensation touched Cristofano suddenly.

For the first time since he had known Savonarola he said to himself, "Supposing he is God-inspired—supposing there *is* a Christ and this man *is* His prophet?"

The thought shook his intellectual calm, his tranquil poise, he paled and shrank before the tortured figure of the monk, for the first time in his life he felt unsettled in the security of his own convictions.

" Why do you trouble about my prophecies ? " added Savonarola. " If they are of God this will be proved in time."

" If thou couldst have given a proof," said the Albizzi in a moved voice, " but one little proof, all Florence would have armed in your defence—nay, if thou canst give a proof now thou wilt be liberated in triumph. *If thy God is Almighty God indeed and thou art His prophet, why dost thou not give this proof ?* There is yet time for a miracle, father."

" Christ Himself performed no miracle when they crucified Him," replied Fra Girolamo.

" Methinks that proved Him mere man," said Cristofano.

" A miracle ! A miracle ! " cried Savonarola. " You are like the others, clamouring for a miracle. I tell you you have your miracle inasmuch that such as I should be destroyed by such as are my judges. How will they slay me ? " he added abruptly.

" I hope thou mayst be saved."

" Do not delude me. Well I know all three must die."

He paused and seemed to listen to the voice of Maruffi, which had sunk to a faint and bitter moaning.

" Fra Silvestro denied me," he continued. " But his prophecies were of God."

" Fra Domenico exalted thee, under the worst torture he smiled and exalted thee," returned Cristofano.

A look of bitterness and grief, envy and shame, passed over Savonarola's haggard face.

" Why was he supported and not I ? " he murmured.

Then, as if with an effort, he made a gesture of dis-

missal, that seemed more a dismissal of the subject than of his visitor.

But Cristofano lingered.

"Couldst thou give some sign, some proof even now, I would believe in Christ and thee," he said.

And he waited, half hoping, half fearing that this shattered man would yet prove the divinity of the God he preached.

But Savonarola was silent.

Silent and motionless.

Cristofano sighed, and his usual smile returned to his calm lips.

He smiled at himself, smiled to think that he had been for a moment deluded into believing in a superstition, a madness, a folly.

"What did God, or the substance we call God, or Nature, or Fate, care about Girolamo Savonarola? Of what interest was he to the High Eternities?"

Of no more, and of as much, as Piero dei Medici, as poor Aprilis who had been crushed between two verities, as himself who by avoiding extremes had attained ambitions that seemed small enough even to himself.

A miracle! A miracle! Who would stoop to perform a miracle for any of them! They were but figures in the Carnival of Fate, rushing hither and thither in confusion and darkness, none knowing the other, all masked, all shouting in a language not understood of his neighbour—all bound to some goal they could scarcely picture much less find, all describing a senseless circle, like the Carnival dancers in the piazza of Florence.

Cristofano thought of the day when he had met Andrea de Salvucci coming from Santa Croce, where

Savonarola's rivals the Franciscans preached, and of the purchase of the Grecian head with the maimed wings for Pico della Mirandola, and of how that young Prince had died, and how Salvucci died, the one in triumph, the other in despair, yet alike both overwhelmed and mastered by the Figure on the Cross.

And Cristofano looked with wonder and compassion at this other man under the power of that terrible symbol whose shadow darkened half the world, and he thought with relief of the Greek head, immobile, calm, beautiful, and symbolic of the peace of those ancient centuries before men worshipped ugliness and pain, poverty and disease, and thought the splendid and the fair sinful.

"If I can be of any service to thee, father, in any way, command my poor endeavours," he said.

Savonarola was still silent; his figure was obscured by the shadows of the cell, the white robe looked bodiless, the drooped head like a lifeless mask.

Cristofano felt oppressed, almost suffocated by the presence of so much silent woe and suffering.

"May thy God strengthen thee, Savonarola!" he cried, and turned, fumbling with unsteady hand for the door-catch.

Fra Girolamo roused himself, and with an effort, throwing wide his arms so that he looked as if crucified against the wall, he cried out with passionate strength:

"My work shall continue the better for my death! Believe that."

He paused, then added in a voice whose power and force filled the narrow cell as completely as the clash of steel a close space:

"If I am deceived, Heaven has deceived me. If I am deceived, God has deceived me. If I have been deluded, these have deluded me. However my body may fail me, to *that* my spirit attests!"

When he had spoken his arms fell, and he sank on to his knees, hiding his face against the wall.

Cristofano could find no answer; sad and shuddering, he quitted the cell, leaving Savonarola alone in the darkness of the prison. As he passed down the corridor he heard Fra Silvestro raving again in the delirium of his fever, and singing hoarsely of the woods of the Casentino and the white and purple anemones that grow round the shrines and crosses of San Giovanni Gualberto near the sanctuary of Vallombrosa.

CHAPTER X

THE END OF THE STORY OF APRILIS

THE first day that Aprilis left her bed she heard of the public execution of Girolamo Savonarola and the two other monks.

Her husband's peasant, pruning the vines of the first long, useless sprays of green, told her the news.

Aprilis sat under the lime tree, which was again filled with bees humming among the open blossoms. The peasant, speaking slowly and more intent on his task than on his recital, told her how the three Dominicans had been hanged and then burnt on that very spot of the Piazza della Signoria where the vanities had been consumed and the pyre had been erected for the trial by fire.

" And Fra Girolamo ? " whispered Aprilis. " Did he say nothing ? Was there no miracle—no sign from Heaven ? "

The man shook his head.

" Nothing."

Aprilis crept up to her room, feeling faint and sick ; the few crude words of the rough man had stirred her imagination into picturing with terrible intensity that scene on the Piazza della Signoria.

And God had not spoken and there had been no

miracle, and Girolamo Savonarola had died like an ordinary man.

Aprilis sat by the spinning-wheel, too weak to weep.

Presently Cristofano joined her ; he carried a branch of purple iris, the lily of Florence, and laid it beside her silent spinning-wheel.

" So Fra Girolamo is dead ? " she murmured. " And he said nothing ? "

Cristofano answered as his peasant had answered, " Nothing."

" In silence, then ? "

" In silence, Aprilis. There was one called out, ' A miracle, prophet, a miracle ! ' but he made no answer. They all died bravely, and Fra Domenico very joyously, faithful and believing to the end."

Aprilis rose to her feet unsteadily. " My God failed and my lover failed," she cried brokenly, " what is there left for me ? Thou shouldst have let me die."

" I needed thee, I need thee, Aprilis—come thou the middle way with me, the way of life and love, neither believing nor doubting,"—his voice shook slightly,— " neither believing nor doubting in anything. I need thee, Aprilis."

She looked at him incredulously.

" *Thou* needst *me !* "

" Truly, Aprilis."

He took her hand timidly, yet his touch conveyed strength to her : a rush of gratitude shook her, gratitude such as she had felt when he had come forward once before to save her pride and rescue her humbled heart from despair.

She looked at him searchingly, keenly, and saw

neither reproach nor contempt nor pity in his earnest face, but only a great tenderness.

From that moment Aprilis began to love her husband, not as she had loved Piero, but truly and faithfully, though in another fashion.

. . . . . .

In the time to come, when she heard of the ignoble death of Piero dei Medici, drowned while flying from the Spanish soldiery, the news scarcely saddened her, for she had a child, and little mattered then to Aprilis, save this boy and Cristofano, who had become a great man in Florence.

Aprilis died young, and was buried beneath a tomb of gilded alabaster in the Church of San Marco, close to the tablet bearing the pompous eulogy of Giovanni Pico, Conte della Mirandola.

On her tomb is inscribed only this: "*Hic jacet Aprilis*," and even these three words are thickly obscured with dust.

Her son lived to see Giovanni dei Medici made Pope, and the Medici re-enter Florence, and the son and brother of Piero take up their residence in the Palace in the Via Larga, also to see another Medici in the papal chair under the name of Clement, in whose reign Rome was sacked, as the prophet had foretold.

Few men, however, remembered this, for Girolamo Savonarola was forgotten as soon as was Piero dei Medici, and both became but a name in the city of Florence, which neither of them could rule.

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